For the good of the knight

A Forever Knight fanzine for charity

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Price: $10
(to benefit Casey House Foundation and Canadian Diabetes Foundation)

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About the charities...

As many of you are already aware, all the proceeds from the sale of this zine will be donated to the two charities being supported by Bridging the Knight.

Casey House Foundation
119 Isabella Street
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1P2
416-962-7600

Casey House Foundation is the fundraising arm for Casey House programs. Casey House Home Hospice Program is a community outreach service which provides 24 hour medical support care to people with AIDS who wish to remain in their own homes, or area waiting a bed at Casey House Hospice. The Home Hospice Program provides a range of in home services, including nursing care, counseling, homemaking services, assistance with medication costs, 24 hour access to nursing support, and complementary therapies such as chiropractic, homeopathy and massage. The program also includes an education component which trains health professionals, family members and volunteers in palliative care for people living with AIDS-skills in which Casey House has gained worldwide recognition.

Canadian Diabetes Association
CDA Enterprises
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Toronto, Ontario M5C 2E3
416-363-0177

The Canadian Diabetes Association is a national, independent, self-financing organization whose mission is to promote the health of Canadians through diabetes research, education, service and advocacy. Insulin was discovered in Canada by doctors Banting and Best with assistance from doctors Macleod and Collip. The Canadian Diabetes Association celebrates the 75th anniversary of the discovery of insulin by continuing to reach toward eliminating diabetes and its complications.

We interrupt this zine for an important announcement...

A project like this seldom gets done by a single person, and this one is certainly no exception. I'd like to thank the Bridging the Knight Convention committee for putting together this weekend and allowing me the opportunity to do this zine. Laurie Salopek started the project, and we should all be grateful to her for her time and efforts, not only here, but for the *Forever Knight* mailing lists as well. Jill Kirby was invaluable in putting this together--Jill, I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks, also, to Jamie Melody Randell for the cover graphic, to Susan Garrett and Karen Swanson for help with last minute layout, proofing and copying. Last but definitely not least, thanks to everyone who sent me stories--your generosity and talent made doing this project and the charitable donation it will generate that much more rewarding.

Sharon

Working with Sharon on this zine has given me a wonderful excuse to read *some* of the terrific fiction that "Forever Knight" has inspired. Hopefully, this represents a cross-section of the best; I wish we could print more! Thanks to Sharon for giving me the opportunity to work on this project, and to stay up until all hours of the night getting cross-eyed and searching for missing commas. Let's do this again-- after a few beers!

Jill

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Jenny's Surprise

by Kathy Whelton

The sound of the phone ringing dragged Nick from the oblivion also known as sleep. He pried one eye open. 1:00 PM. This better be good. The answering machine clicked on.

"This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado..."

"Nick? Nick, it's Schanke. Pick up the phone. PICK UP THE PHONE, NICK."

Nick rolled over on the couch and put the receiver to his ear. "What is it, Schanke? This better be good."

"Man, oh man. I'm glad you're there. I need to ask you a little favor, buddy."

Nick sighed. "What can I do for you, Schank?"

"Well, it's like this. Myra and I are supposed to go to her cousin's wedding this evening. It's a formal thing, you know. No kids. Anyway, Jenny's babysitter canceled at the last minute and we haven't been able to get anyone else. Myra's gonna be real ticked if we miss this wedding. So we were wondering...

I know you're off tonight. Would you watch Jenny for a couple of hours, please?"

"....I don't know, Schank. I don't know much about kids."

"She's an angel, Nick. She won't be any trouble. I promise."

"OK, OK." How tough can taking care of an eight year old girl be, Nick thought to himself?

"Thanks so much, buddy. I owe you. We'll drop her off in about an hour."

Slightly less than an hour later Nick opened the elevator door to Don and a rather sullen-looking Jenny Schanke. "Myra's waiting in the car. It is really coming down out there. She didn't want to get her hair wet."

Jenny stood there, her Pocahontas backpack on, firmly glued to her father's side.

"Well, I'd better run." Don Schanke pried his daughter off his arm. "You two have fun. We'll be back by 9:00, 10:00 at the latest."

"Dad..." Jenny started, then closed her mouth.

The elevator door slid shut.

"So, Jenny, what would you like to do?" Nick plastered his cheeriest smile on his face, even though he had no business even being conscious at this hour. He and Jenny had always gotten along when he had visited the Schankes. This was probably just one of those kid separation anxiety things.

Jenny took three fast steps backward as he approached. "You stay away from me, Nick...whatever your name really is. I know what you are. I have the crucifix I got for my first Holy Communion, and I'm not afraid to use it." Jenny grabbed quickly at a small gold cross around her neck.

Maybe this wasn't one of those kid separation anxiety things after all.

Nick kept the smile stuck on his face. Maybe he could humor her out of this. "What is it, exactly, that you think I am?"

"Well, you are a vampire, of course."

Nick continued to smile, hoping to keep up the facade a little while longer. "What in the world would ever make you think I was a vampire?"

"OK," Jenny acknowledged. "I can understand why you would want to play it this way. Let's say I've had my suspicions about you since you were first partnered with my Dad. But if you want me to spell it out, I'll spell it out."

"Please do," Nick replied.

"Well, let's start with a biggie. The allergy to sunlight, how lame is that?"

"There are people allergic to sunlight. I..."

"Yeah, right. Whatever. Then there is the food thing. You've never eaten anything any time you have been to our house. You pretend to eat. There are a lot of things you can say about my mom, but she is a good cook." Jenny paused, waiting for a response. When she didn't get one, she continued. "All this was enough to get me wondering, so I started listening to my parents talk in bed."

"You listen to your parents in bed?" The surprise was evident in Nick's voice.

"Sure, most of the time you just hear all that icky, mushy grownup stuff. But it can be a great source of info, you know. Christmas presents and such. Well, anyway I started to pay attention to what my Dad was saying about you. Every morning he would have another Nick story. He could never understand how you would get from one place to another so fast, or the things the perps sometimes said about you. He really admires you, you know."

Nick let the comment pass.

"I thought when you got arrested for that murder earlier this year you were done. Steel shutters on the windows. Blood in the refrigerator. How dense can people be?"

"Adult human beings are notorious for their tunnel vision. They see what the want to see," Nick responded quietly. "If something doesn't fit into their concept of reality, they don't believe it."

"Well, I guess so. Anyway, when you got out of that I did a little more checking. I hacked into your personnel files at Police Headquarters."

"You did what?" Nick asked incredulously.

"I got into your personnel file. Then I checked with the Chicago PD. After that, I looked you up with the Bureau of

Vital Statistics. Your identity fell apart like a house of cards. You should really do something about that."

"Thanks," Nick responded morosely. "I will."

"Which brings me to the point of this conversation."

"Which is what, may I ask?"

"I want you to buy me a computer," Jenny stated with a self-assured grin on her face. "In return for my silence, I want you to buy me a computer. A state-of-the-art laptop, not like that old thing of yours." Jenny gestured to the kitchen table where Nick's computer sat. "My Mom and Dad say they can't afford one, and the computers at school are so outdated it's not funny."

"You seemed to have managed all right with them," Nick speculated.

Jenny shrugged. "And don't try to tell me you can't afford it. I've seen your bank account. Who keeps 1.2 million in a checking account anyway?"

"Do you mind if I think this over a bit?" Nick asked.

"Sure, no problem. Shouldn't you be asleep or something, anyway?"

"Funny you should mention that. I was asleep before your Dad called."

"Well you stay on your side of the room, and I'll stay on mine. We will get along just fine." Jenny had a few other things in her Pocahontas backpack, but she didn't want to have to use them unless she got desperate. "And don't be thinking about trying anything, I can't be hypnotized."

Nick walked over and flopped on the couch. He wasn't about to get any sleep with Jenny the Vampire Slayer in the house, but he could use some quiet time to think. This could get messy, especially if she really was a resistor. Perhaps if he gave it some time, she would start to let her guard down. That could only help his cause. He heard Jenny start up his computer. Soon she was gleefully tapping away.

A couple of hours passed. Nick rested, turned the TV on, turned the TV off. Jenny was still fully engaged with the laptop. Nick decided it was time to confront the situation. It wouldn't do to have Schanke and Myra come back early and have this still unresolved. Nick rose and headed over to the kitchen table. Jenny was still engrossed with the keyboard. She barely seemed to notice him.

"Look, Jenny...." he started.

Suddenly she looked up, but not at him. "Did you hear something?"

"I don't know, maybe a plane." He really hadn't been paying attention. "Jenny, we need to talk."

There it was again, louder this time. The sound of thunder in the distance. "They did say something about a line of thunderstorms on TV," Nick informed her.

With the sound of the next thunderclap Jenny jumped to her feet, sending the chair flying out behind her. There was a wild look in her eyes. The self-assured blackmailer was gone, and all that remained was the eight-year-old girl.

Nick pretended not to notice. He casually walked back and sat on the couch. He could hear the sound of her heart beginning to race.

"There is room here on the couch if you want to sit down."

She hesitated until the next peal of thunder and then, with almost supernatural speed, she was beside him.

"It's all right Jenny, you're safe. Nothing is going to hurt you." Nick spoke in low, reassuring tones. Slowly she inched closer to him. Cautiously, he slid his arms around her. Her little body shook, almost uncontrollably. Nick gathered her to him, gently rocking her. He began singing softly to her in French, something he remembered his mother singing in the dim past.

Gradually the storm abated, and with it Jenny's terror.

After resting in his arms for a while, Jenny looked up. She brushed the remnants of tears from her eyes. "I seem to have made a complete fool out of myself," she stated in a rather small voice.

"Don't be silly. I'm just glad I could help."

"You don't have to give me the computer." She paused. "I was afraid... afraid of you. I thought my asking for it would make me look tough." Jenny looked down. "I was worried about my Dad, you know, being with you all the time."

"I know, Jenny. I understand." Nick lifted her chin gently and met her eyes. "I care a great deal about your dad, and I care about you. I would never do anything to hurt either one of you."

"Honest?"

"Honest." Nick smiled. "Now, with that out of the way, let's find you something to eat." Nick stood and walked to the kitchen. "We seem to have the makings of some hot cocoa here, and how about popcorn for supper?"

"Hot cocoa and popcorn for supper? Cool!"

Nick said a silent prayer of thanks that Natalie's culinary tastes were roughly the same as that of an eight-year-old girl. "And as a special treat, I believe I have a copy of Pocahontas here somewhere."

"Pocahontas!" She eyed him suspiciously. "How did you know that was my favorite?"

"Well, I'm not going to tell you all my secrets."

They snuggled on the couch together to watch the movie. Just as the closing credits were running, the phone rang.

"Knight."

"Nick, old buddy. I have a bit of a problem here. There is local street flooding because of the heavy rain. I don't think we are going to make it back. Can Jenny stay with you?"

"Well, it's fine by me, Schank, but I think you should ask Jenny. She's right here." Nick handed the phone to Jenny.

"Jenny, honey, the bridge is out here by Auntie Jean's. I'm afraid you'll have to spend the night."

On the other end of the line, Don Schanke was trying to figure out what he had said that was quite so funny.

After several minutes, Jenny finally regained her composure. "Sure, Dad, no problem. Uncle Nick and I are doing just fine. Don't worry about me-- I'll see you tomorrow."

Jenny turned and looked at Nick. "Now. About that 478 million in the Brabant Foundation."

Paternal Order

by Susan M. Garrett

After a case like this, it was expected--tensions were being released in destructive ways. Raised voices ebbed and flowed from and into harsh whispers, pencils were being snapped and mauled and chewed on, and someone even had the audacity to *thump* the water cooler.

Reese didn't blame them. His problem was that he could do so little and yet even that little had to be done.

Vetter was sitting in front of her computer with one hand shading her eyes, which he knew had to be closed, trying to appear like she wasn't listening to the conversation--aw, hell, it was an *argument*--going on between Lambert and Knight at the desk beside her own. For a moment, he pitied the poor kid. It looked like she was coping, though. From what he'd heard, she'd known enough about arguments growing up. Which was one reason he shouldn't let this one go on any longer than it already had.

"Doctor," he called, standing in his doorway with arms folded across his chest. "Can I have a minute of your time?"

Natalie Lambert looked up at him with a guilty expression. "Sure, Captain." She shot a look at Knight, who must have said something--there was a whisper back that he couldn't hear, but it sure as hell made Knight flinch. And the way Natalie Lambert walked up to his doorway, he was *very* sure that argument was going to continue the moment she returned.

If Knight was still there.

Well, he could do something about that, too, maybe.

"C'mon in," he said, with a heavy sigh. Reese stepped out into the hall as Natalie Lambert walked by him, then he looked straight across the room where Knight was angrily rattling his desk drawer in an attempt to get it back into the track. "Knight--I need to check with you before you head off shift. Hang for a minute, will you?"

Knight looked up at him with an expression that said he'd rather be anywhere else right now, thank you and why the hell was this drawer sticking? But that flash of anger disappeared under a mask. The detective was good at that, when he thought about it...keeping the mask in place. That subservient, "Okay, Captain," with just a touch of anger underneath.

He was meant for better things, that one. God only knew why he'd never bothered to take the high roads out of here. Reese hesitated in the doorway, watching him. It wasn't a lack of political savy--Knight knew how to pull strings, but he hated doing it--or a lack of ambition. The man knew how to work, knew how to dog a case. It was more like he really cared about what he was doing, or tried to. Hell of a thing for a detective to care about the cases he handled. Men burned out faster when they cared. Especially the ones who lived for the force, the loners like Knight.

"Captain?" asked Natalie Lambert.

Closing the door, Reese leaned on it for a moment, looking through the slats of the window shades--yeah, Knight was staying put. Then he walked over to his desk and picked up the envelope that had been left there at the beginning of shift. Tapping it against his hand, he said wearily, "I don't want to hold you up, Doctor. This will just take a moment of your time. You wanna have a seat?"

He saw her fight the urge to check the window herself to see if Knight was still there. Although some part of him wanted to tell her it was okay, that Knight wasn't going anywhere, he didn't. He couldn't. He knew how these things worked.

Natalie Lambert sat down in the chair opposite his desk, even as he pushed back the picture of his wife and kids to lean on the desk edge, sighing beneath his breath as he lifted his weight from the worn soles of his shoes. "God, my feet hurt. Worst part of this job--being on your feet all day. Gets worse when you're behind a desk, if you can believe it."

"I can," said Natalie Lambert sympathetically. She clasped her hands together in her lap and looked down at them. "Captain, look, I'm sorry if Nick and I got a little loud just now, but--"

"Not a problem. We're all wound tight after this one."

Her answering smile was wan...but it was a smile. Good, he didn't want her to think she was being called on the carpet. She wasn't. She was one of the best people they had. And from those circles under her eyes, those lines on her face, they might not have her much longer... "How are you holding up?"

"Holding up?" Natalie seemed surprised by the question, then rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "After a fifteen hour shift--oops, my mistake--" she glanced down at her watch, "*sixteen* hours--"

Reese leaned forward and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Go home, Natalie. Get some sleep."

She forced a another smile. "We've still got a couple of bodies in the cooler. God knows how many they'll find by morning--"

"Read my lips-- *go home*. A couple of hours won't make a difference to them, poor souls." Reese stifled a yawn with his hand and dropped the envelope to the floor, hoping his clumsiness looked natural. "Better take my own advice. And I was supposed to double-check the homework on the youngest this morning, too."

She bent down to pick up the envelope and was handing it to him when he saw her recognize Nick's handwriting on the front. She released the envelope reluctantly--her hand wasn't shaking but he saw another line appear on her face, no matter how calm, cool, and collected she tried to be.

Masks. They all had them, didn't they? Only way to do what they did, day in and day out, and survive.

"That's from Nick," she said, in a careful, even tone.

"Yep." Reese held the envelope in his hand, as if balancing it. "He dropped it off at the start of shift. I think it's his resignation."

She rose from the chair almost involuntarily, her eyes flickering toward the window, then back to the envelope in his hand. "His...resignation?"

"Yes. I'm afraid it is. I'm also afraid I'm going to give it proper and due consideration." Leaning to one side of the desk, he tore the envelope in half and dropped the pieces into the wastepaper basket.

Natalie's eyes widened. Stunned, she licked her lips, unable to move. "Really, Captain, don't you think--?"

"Why bother? It's just like all the other ones."

"The...other ones?" Natalie cleared her throat, started to say something, then stopped again. "What? I don't--?"

Reese looked past her, to the outer office. Yeah, it was time someone tumbled onto this truth. They were all under stress. That's why he'd called her in here. He met her eyes and saw the fear she was trying to hide--that bad, was it?

"Let me show you something," he said, after a moment's pause. "But what you see stays in here, between us, okay?"

Another flash of fear in her eyes, covered up so quickly. Damn shame such a pretty woman--and *nice*--lived behind so many masks, with so much fear. "Okay."

Reese walked over to his filing cabinet and squatted down by the lowest drawer, groaning when his back gave a twinge. He had to move this stuff up higher, and soon. Wasn't getting any younger, was he?

"When an officer gets transferred, they send over all the requisite paperwork. I guess when Knight got shunted over here, there was some extra stuff Stonetree thought his new captain should have." He lifted the envelope box, rested it on the open drawer for a moment as he levered himself to a standing position, then bent down and picked up the box again. "Amanda Cohen added to it. And when--well, when it fell to me, I've been keeping the paperwork. Although there've been just too damn many of them lately..."

He handed her the box. Natalie took it like he was handing her hot coals--holding it gingerly and looking up to meet his eyes with an expression that couldn't decide between worried and confused.

Good. Let the masks fall.

Reese walked back behind his desk and eased into his chair. He gestured toward the box, saying, "Go ahead. Open it."

She did, sitting down in the chair opposite his desk and removing the top of the box, which she dropped to the floor. He gave her a minute or two to sort through the envelopes, to understand what she had in her hands. Then she looked up at him, her expression settling into confusion. "Can I--?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

She picked one at random, opened it, and read. She wasn't the kind of person who read with her lips moving--probably would have chapped lips by now from the amount of stuff she had to handle in her line of work. But he watched her as she read one, then another, then another.

By the fifth letter, her lips had drawn into a grim smile, but she carefully replaced each letter back in the proper envelope and the proper sequence after reading it. Meticulous. That was the word to describe her. Bet her place over at the Coroner's Office was neat, too. Had to make time to visit. Had always meant to, but since he'd come aboard under such circumstances and his street days were a half a decade past....

"How many times *has* he resigned?"

He didn't miss the tight quality of her smile or the chill in her voice as she looked up at him. "About thirty-something, not counting the ones I tossed. The plane crash--that one was for real. But the others--?" He shrugged and leaned back in his chair even as she picked up the box lid and set it in place. "It's the pressure. Does crazy things to some of us. We need to tell ourselves that we can walk away, that we've got somewhere else to go. That when it gets bad, we could be somewhere else. That's why Knight writes those letters. That's his out--it gives him a little mental breathing room. Drop off a letter, walk out the door, and it's over. Or that's what he tells himself."

"Is it?" Natalie Lambert's voice was soft. She placed the box of envelopes on the desk. "I don't think you understand--it *is* that easy for him. He could do it. He's...he's done it before."

"I thought he might have." Reese nodded. That's what he'd wanted to hear. "Hell of a lot less self-destructive than drugs or booze. Me--I curl up with *The Sporting News*, a cup of coffee, and a pound of bridge mix. But the point is...*everybody's* gotta have an out. Knight can write all the letters he wants. Someday he may drop off a letter and not show up for the next shift, but for right now if it helps, it helps."

She was staring at the box. He could tell what she was thinking, trying to match letters with cases or events. They'd been together a couple of years, hadn't they, her and Knight? Good people, both of them. Odd, in their own ways. But most people on the force, particularly the night shift, were.

"So, Doctor," he said, clearing his throat to shake her from whatever dreams or nightmares she was currently resurrecting and reviewing, "what about you?"

Those eyes awakened, widening slightly--hazel, was that the color? "Me?" She gave a nervous laugh. "What about me?"

"What do *you* do? Like you said, you've been straight on for fifteen--no, that's *sixteen* hours, right? And you've been pulling a week of hell shifts, anyway." Reese leaned forward, wanting to catch her before the masks fell into place again, before she became a competent, self-effacing, 'I do my job' coroner again. "You need a day to get out of town, go shopping, fly-fishing...whatever?"

The corner of her mouth quirked slightly. "Fly-fishing?"

Good--a smile. He spread his hands. "Or whatever. You need the time, you take it. But you gotta tell me."

She hesitated. There was a moment of thought...and the smile disappeared. The mask fell into place too quickly. "Thanks, Captain--Joe. But I'm okay. I just need a good night's sleep, that's all. And you're going to need

me around tomorrow night, depending on what they dig up tonight."

When she rose from her seat, he knew that he wouldn't have a second chance. With no small amount of regret, he rose as well and leaned past her to get the door. "Yeah, guess you're right. But you go home and take the phone off the hook. You get that good night's sleep. I need my people healthy *and* here. Understood?"

"Understood." But she half-turned as he opened the door and said, "Pinball."

It was a gift from heaven. Reese narrowed his eyes and asked, "Pinball?" leaning on the door to keep it closed.

"Uh-huh." Another smile, maybe guilty and a little embarrassed, so she looked down at the floor and scuffed the toe of her shoe. "Arcade games. You know, mindless stuff. But not Nintendo or anything. The kind where you can go to the arcade and, when you don't win...."

"You beat the living hell out of the machine?" guessed Reese, when she didn't finish the thought.

Natalie Lambert's smile was broader, less embarrassed. "Just thought you should know. In case a call ever comes in. Do we have a radio code for 'insane coroner destroying video game'?"

"We'll make one up," he promised. Then he opened the door for her, adding, "Get a good night's sleep, okay?"

"You too. And good luck with the homework."

He merely grunted. And he waited. And he watched.

Natalie Lambert looked over at Knight. He couldn't see her face, but he did see the pause--she could walk out of there, or she could walk over to him. The fact that Knight looked up at her seemed to swing the decision in his favor. Reese pretended to be busy with a paper on the bulletin board, but he caught their reflections in the glass door. A couple of words, real quiet. Natalie wasn't as grim as before--the mask was gone, although it took a couple of seconds for Knight to lose his. She touched his arm, said something, then headed for the door.

Knight picked up his keys from the desk as she walked away. Reese hurriedly moved to his office door again, barking, "Knight?"

Natalie stopped, glancing back at Reese over her shoulder, but he just nodded at her. "G'night, Doctor." Then he crooked a finger, gesturing Knight forward. "You got a minute?"

A little unnerved, maybe even hesitant, Knight looked toward Natalie, then walked over to Reese with measured steps. He slipped into the office and wiped his hand across his face. "Um, Captain, about that letter--"

"Already taken care of."

Reese leaned over, picked up the garbage can, and showed him the contents. Knight nodded somewhat sheepishly in response, then met his eyes. "Thanks."

"We had a lousy case. We *have* a lousy case," Reese corrected himself quickly. "Which means I need you and Vetter to sew up the details tomorrow night. I want the Crown Attorney to drop our paperwork in front of a judge and get an indictment in five minutes or less."

"You'll have it."

"I expect to." He let his hard glare soften. "But that's tomorrow. Would you do me a favor --give Dr. Lambert a ride home tonight?"

Knight looked over his shoulder. Reese could see Natalie Lambert from where he was standing; she was at the front desk, talking to someone. "Her car--"

"She's coming off a sixteen hour shift. The woman's exhausted." He rubbed his eyes wearily, then focused again to see Knight watching him closely. "Hell, we're *all* exhausted. But I'd like her to get home in one piece tonight. If it's a problem, I can have a uniform drop her--"

"No. No, it's okay. I'd be happy to drop her home."

Knight's voice was just a little too eager in his acceptance; the averted glance afterwards sealed it. "Thanks. Tell her I'll have a uniform take her car by tomorrow if she'll leave the keys."

"If she's on late-shift tomorrow night, I can drive her in...."

This time the offer was just a shade less eager, more of that 'friendly, working cameraderie' type of thing. The mask was back.

Now that he was pretty certain what was beneath it, it didn't bother Reese as much. He let his own mask fall into place, waving Knight away. "You work it out--just get her home. Me, I got two pages of multiplication tables to deal with if my kid's going to make it out of second grade."

Knight's expression was part commiseration and...was that envy? Damn, the man had nothing to be envious about. He had time for a family yet. Plenty of time.

Both of them did.

Reese called again as Knight turned, halfway out the door. "Nick--?"

"Captain?"

"When you take Dr. Lambert home, you might wanna swing by Yonge Street. There's still a couple of video arcades open, even at this god-awful hour of the morning."

That got him a raised eyebrow, a look like he was crazy. "Sure, Captain." And then Knight headed out the door as if he was afraid the sudden madness might be contagious.

The next shift were already settling into place. Reese watched them as they wandered in with coffee or danish or...God, he wished Artiz would get off this cold pizza for breakfast kick. Turned his stomach.

Even as he watched the night shift give way to morning, he kept his eyes on Knight and Lambert. She knew what was going on; she was the smarter of the two. The glance Natalie gave him over her shoulder as Knight placed a hand on her shoulder and escorted her out of the station told him that much. And maybe that she didn't mind his intervention, not really.

With a sigh, he turned back to his office and picked up the box of envelopes. Had Knight seen them?

He swore under his breath as he walked over to the filing cabinet, then decided that it didn't really matter. He was replacing the box in the lowest drawer of his filing cabinet when he heard Vetter behind him.

"Captain? I'm just signing out. Unless you want me to finish up that report--?"

"Go home, Tracy." Reese placed his hand in the small of his back and let out a groan as he rose. "Why they don't make these things higher is beyond me. Damn filing cabinets."

"I can stay a little while longer, if you really want those reports."

He hesitated, then turned toward her. No, she wasn't being over-eager, wasn't trying to snow him--didn't have to, not with her dad being who he was. There was almost a desperation in the look she gave him. A need to be needed.

He didn't *need* those reports. He didn't *need* the overtime showing up on the monthly balance sheets. But he nodded and gave her his best smile. "Okay. If you can put in another hour, I'd appreciate it. It'll give us a head start on what they find today. I need that paperwork for the Crown Attorney, ASAP."

"Sure, Captain." Tracy gave him a bright smile--he wondered how the hell she managed after a shift like the one they'd had and decided that youth was wasted on the young. "I'll get right on it." But on her way out, she paused and turned back. "Captain, you look tired. Maybe *you* should go home?"

"Maybe I should. And maybe I shouldn't be taking advice from smart-mouthed, young detectives."

She took it as intended, smiling back. "Good night to you, too, Captain."

But she was right. Reese pulled his overcoat from the rack and threw it over his shoulder--it wasn't cold enough to bother with, knowing that he was a couple of steps from the car. He echoed the half-hearted good-nights from the remains of the late-shift and the disturbingly chipper greetings from the incoming members of the new shift, consoling himself that another day was over and it was time to return home to his house, his breakfast, and his family.

Correction--his *other* family.

Night Passages

by LaurieCF

The Raven stood dark and empty. Nothing remained to remind its owner of the cheerful, raucous crowd which had filled it mere hours before. As she had done for the past three nights, Janette had shooed the other denizens of the club out the door at closing time, allowing her guest some privacy for his somber thoughts. It was not an altruistic gesture on her part. Given his mood of late, her mentor was even more dangerous than usual, and Janette had sense enough to realize it.

She sat pensively in her accustomed perch by the bar, sipping from a glass without really tasting it. Now and then she glanced up and frowned as she contemplated the rear of the bar where light spilled softly through the open doorway to her private room. With an unvoiced sigh, she turned back to her glass, consigning this lovers' holiday to the nethermost regions of hell.

Alone in the inner sanctum, LaCroix angled his glass of wine-mixed blood, admiring the way the fine crystal sparkled as it caught the light.

"Just like the stars," he murmured to no one. His defenses weakened momentarily, and the unwanted memories flooded back, no longer held at bay.

"Damn him." He hurled the glass at the far wall, where it shattered into a thousand fragments. Janette, hearing the noise, rushed in the door. She stared at the glistening mess now decorating the wall and floor and started to curse under her breath.

"Really, *mon cher*," she couldn't help scolding. "After two thousand years, you should have learned some self-control."

His eyes burned into her. She involuntarily backed up a step and raised a placating hand.

"All right, never mind. Shall I get you another glass?"

"Don't bother. But more wine would be appreciated." LaCroix forcibly reined in his emotions, and his eyes returned to the cold, dead stare that passed for normality with him. Janette breathed a sigh of relief as she hastened to carry out the request.

She soon returned with a bottle and two glasses, ignoring his words. She silently filled both glasses with the blood/wine mixture, then placed one on the table before him, together with the bottle. LaCroix contemplated the glass with a bitter stare.

"Damn him," he repeated, though without the earlier heat.

Janette had been on her way out the door, but his words stopped her in her tracks. She turned back to face him.

"You've been fighting with Nicholas." It was not a question.

LaCroix uttered a snort that she took as an affirmative response. Janette slowly retraced her steps.

"What happened?"

"What ever happens? We argued, we fought. Same old story." He lifted the crystal and drained it, poured himself another.

"What about?"

"Hmm."

"What did you fight about?" She seated herself at the table across from him.

"Love." He spat the word with a twisted sneer, as he drained another glass. "I invited a friend of his to dinner, and he took exception."

"Doctor Lambert?" Janette hissed the name in astonishment as she leaned forward. "What have you done? Did you bring her across?"

"What?" It was obvious LaCroix's thoughts were elsewhere; it took a moment for him to realize she had asked a question. "No, of course not. This is hardly the time or place to be carrying out conversions."

"At least you showed some sense. LaCroix, our Nicholas cares deeply for that mortal. I would think you might have realized the dangers of meddling with his affections after that debacle with the Clochet child."

LaCroix looked up in surprise. "He told you about that?"

"I had to pry it out of him, but yes. He told me. Almost one hundred years, LaCroix, and he still hasn't returned to us. What were you thinking? Do you want to lose him completely?"

"What was I thinking?" LaCroix rose to his feet and began pacing the room which was suddenly too small to contain his emotions. "I was thinking that we had an agreement, and that, as usual, he was trying to weasel out of it."

"An agreement?"

"For Fleur. He owed me for Fleur. He agreed to it, damn him!"

"Agreed to what?"

"A fair exchange. His beloved for mine. If he ever knows love for a mortal, something I am beginning to

doubt." He stopped pacing long enough to glare at her. "I don't expect you to understand. You have never loved."

"No?" One word only, and softly spoken, but this time it was LaCroix who looked away.

"I am sorry. That was unfair."

"No. It is true. My feelings for Nicholas are different, as are the circumstances. I have never loved, not the way you mean. Not like you and Fleur. My mortal life taught me that much, at least."

His face twisted. "In that, you are fortunate."

"In that. And in other things." Janette approached her mentor and guided him back into the chair. She stood behind him, gently caressing his neck and shoulders, trying to soothe him. "I made my decision and never looked back. I am happy with my life. Not like our poor, tormented Nicholas." Her stroking had a calming effect; LaCroix slowly relaxed as he leaned into her touch.

"You are a fine daughter, Janette. I fear I don't appreciate you as I should."

She shrugged. "The problem child demands most of a parent's attention. It is only natural. So. What happened with Doctor Lambert?"

Despite himself, LaCroix smiled at the recollection. "We had a very interesting conversation. I admit, I half expected her to run away the moment I introduced myself."

Janette smiled as she claimed the seat opposite her master and retrieved her glass. "She didn't though, did she?"

"No. She seemed to view our meeting as a challenge and an opportunity. Her curiosity quite outweighed her fear." He peered closely at Janette. "You know her, don't you?"

"We've met a few times."

"And you like her. I can tell." Janette shrugged, conceding the point as she sipped at her wine. "I understand. Nicholas' taste is improving. I found her quite fascinating, for a mortal. She may even be worthy of immortality some day. A pity we had so little time together."

"Because Nicholas arrived," Janette guessed.

"Yes. I felt him coming, so I entranced her. Our business was none of her concern. I reminded Nicholas of our bargain. He has never understood what I suffered, what I still suffer on account of his sister. For one night, I wanted him to know that pain, to suffer as I have. I thought that by threatening the woman he loved, he might at least begin to understand." He grimaced. "A foolish thought, but it seemed logical at the time."

"And?"

"And he denied he was in love with her. Claimed to be using her 'infatuation with him,' as he described it, for his own purposes. I thought to call his bluff, so I demanded that he prove his indifference by bringing her across. And he agreed."

"He agreed?" Janette choked on her wine. "Nicholas?!"

"Shocking, isn't it? Our Nicholas, who in eight hundred years has always refused my orders to bring someone across, whether friend, foe or perfect stranger. I expected him to make some feeble effort to escape with her, or at least to attack me again. Perhaps even utter some mulish plea for mercy. In some way, acknowledge his concern, his fear. His pain." He shook his head. "Instead, he agrees. And then begins to follow through."

Janette stared at LaCroix. "He didn't...you didn't...you stopped him?"

"Of course I stopped him. I can't say whether he would have brought her across or killed her outright, but either would have been a disaster. The dinner reservation was in my name. The young lady is a figure of local importance. Her death or disappearance in such suspicious circumstances would raise far too many awkward questions for our kind. Besides which our Nicholas is incapable of bringing anyone across successfully. He hasn't developed the strength of mind, nor the will to exercise it properly. I was forced to concede the game to him. He is doubtless comfortably settled in her apartment right now, whispering sweet nothings and enjoying his latest triumph over me." He drained another glass in one motion and refilled it, then looked at the empty bottle expectantly.

Janette sighed. At the rate LaCroix was consuming her private stock, she'd have to arrange for a supplemental shipment before the end of the month.

"Does it help?" she inquired curiously. "The alcohol, I mean? I find the taste pleasurable, but it has never seemed to affect me as it does mortals."

"Not really," he confessed. "But it does make me tired, and that blurs the pain. Somewhat."

<<We have company.>> Janette felt the approaching presence and looked surreptitiously at LaCroix, but her master seemed not to have noticed. That was most unusual. Perhaps the wine was indeed having an effect. She frowned.

Ordinarily she would have welcomed their visitor, but tonight his arrival seemed an awkward and unwarranted intrusion.

"I'll get some more wine."

She silently considered how to evict their unwelcome visitor as she picked up the empty bottle and headed for the bar. But she was too late, for as she reached the doorway, she found the entry already blocked. His befuddled senses finally reacting, LaCroix looked up, tired and spent with the emotional turmoil of the past few days. He stared with disbelieving eyes at his errant son, wondering if his presence were a trick of the wine.

"Who invited you?"

Nicholas stared at the slumped figure in the chair. His vampire father looked more exhausted than Nick ever remembered seeing him.

"We have unfinished business," Nick replied.

"Go home, Nicholas." Janette put an arm around Nicholas' shoulders and tried to lead him out of the room, but he shook her off.

"No, Janette. LaCroix and I have matters to discuss."

"Not tonight," she said firmly, still refusing to let go. "Anything you want to say can wait. Your friend is all right, is she not?"

"Nat? Yeah, she's fine. No thanks to him." He glared at LaCroix. "Do you know what he did?"

"Yes. I know. Which is more than you do. Now go home, Nicholas. Neither LaCroix nor I is in the mood to listen to your whining right now."

"Whining! Janette, he almost killed Nat tonight. And then he almost forced me to do it for him."

"Did he?" Nick noticed that Janette sounded neither surprised nor convinced. "I thought you said she was all right."

"Only because I ..." he choked on the words.

"Because you lied?" Janette suggested. "Because you denied your feelings, both to him and yourself?" At that remark, LaCroix looked up from his drink for only the second time since Nick's unexpected arrival with a contemptuous snort, before returning his gaze to the table before him.

"I don't know!" Nick admitted. "I don't know what I feel. But I couldn't let him have her. I will not let you have her, LaCroix," he warned. "Whatever it takes. Leave Natalie alone, you hear me?"

LaCroix growled inaudibly as he shook his head in irritation. As he'd thought, the boy had totally missed the point. As usual.

Janette turned to LaCroix. "Tell him," she ordered. <<A pair of fools, the both of you. Why do I put up with this idiocy?>> "You might as well, you know. He'll give you no peace until you do."

LaCroix shook his head. "You tell him if you're so set on it."

"Tell me what?" Nick demanded suspiciously.

"LaCroix never had any intention of bringing your friend Natalie across."

"I don't believe you. I know what I saw."

"You saw what you wanted to see," Janette spoke with exasperation. "*Mon cher*, LaCroix made the dinner reservations in his own name. Would he have done that if he had designs upon your Natalie?"

Nick stared at Janette, then at LaCroix. The Code was explicit about conditions for killings and conversions in the modern era, and whatever else he did, the vampire master always adhered to the Code. "Is that true?"

LaCroix shrugged. "And if it is?"

"Then why the elaborate charade? What was the point?"

LaCroix grimaced. "Ah yes. The point." He downed the rest of his drink. "I thought you were getting another bottle," he reminded Janette. She glowered at them both before leaving the room.

"You were saying, LaCroix?" Nick demanded when his father subsided into silence.

"Does it matter? Your friend is safe, that's all that concerns you, isn't it? It's all that ever does." The elder vampire spoke with bitter sarcasm.

"It matters. I need to know if you're going to come after her again. Tomorrow, perhaps, or next week, or next year?"

"No. I am not. Feel better now, do we? Then go away, and leave me in peace." He almost snatched the new bottle from Janette's hands, poured out another glass and drained it in a single motion. He immediately refilled the glass.

Nick frowned as he looked at Janette. "How much wine has he had?" he asked, with grudging concern.

Janette shrugged. "That's his third bottle since he arrived tonight. I can't answer for what he may have drunk before that."

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Nick walked slowly toward the table where his father was seated.

LaCroix actually paused for a moment as though giving the question some consideration. "No. I don't think so. I can still remember." He drained another glass and refilled it..

"What is he talking about?" Nick asked Janette in confusion. Assured by them both that Nat was safe and would remain so, he suddenly realized there were other things going on. And it seemed that LaCroix had no intention of enlightening him.

Janette glared at him. She truly loved Nicholas, but there were times she didn't like him at all.

"You really don't know, do you?" she remarked scornfully.

"If I did, I wouldn't need to ask, would I?" He spoke with that sheepish, little boy grin that made her want to simultaneously cuddle and throttle him.

He studied LaCroix uneasily, thinking back to their confrontation at the restaurant. "Is this something to do with my sister?"

LaCroix suddenly laughed. It was a harsh, discordant sound in the otherwise silent club. "Something. Oh, bravo, Nicholas. Clever boy."

He again reached for the bottle, but this time Nick intercepted it. They glared at one another resentfully.

"What are you trying to prove?" Nick demanded.

"Let go." LaCroix hissed the words, his eyes sparkling dangerously.

Janette moved between them to avert another confrontation. She had just paid the final bills for last year's redecoration and remodeling of the Raven, and had no desire to go through the process again. She took a firm hold on Nick's elbow, and this time ignored his attempts to pull away.

"Let him have it, Nicholas," she ordered. "Come with me."

"Get him out of here, Janette," LaCroix growled his agreement.

Janette firmly dragged Nicholas toward the door. Her vampire sibling hesitated about halfway, turning back to stare at their father, but he finally allowed himself to be removed. Janette closed the door to the back room and led Nick over to the bar. She refilled her own glass and offered him one. Nick politely demurred.

"What's going on, Janette? I've never seen him like that."

"Have you ever looked?" she rejoined tartly. "*Mon cher*, you always see what you want to see." He looked at her with obvious confusion. "Nicholas, I am not going to tell you that LaCroix is a saint. We both know he is not. But neither is he the monster you insist on seeing. He has fears, concerns, feelings-- though he would prefer it were otherwise." She smiled a rueful smile and raised her hand to lightly caress Nick's face. "Poor Nicholas. So desperately striving to regain his humanity," she murmured, continuing her gentle stroking. "And poor LaCroix, so desperately trying to escape from his."

"What is wrong with him, Janette?" Nick asked quietly.

"You love your friend Natalie, do you not?" she responded indirectly.

Nick threw a furtive glance toward the closed door behind them.

"He can't hear you now. And it wouldn't matter if he did."

"I don't know, Janette. I... I think so."

"Then imagine that she is dead. Imagine spending the rest of eternity without her, yet never able to forget her, or the feelings you shared together."

"That isn't going to happen," Nick insisted. "Nat's working on a cure. I'm not --"

"*Think*, Nicholas," Janette insisted. "Do it. And remember, too, that she might have been with you for all eternity but for a choice you made."

Nick briefly tried to imagine it and quailed at the thought. "I cannot."

"He has to." She jerked her head toward the closed door. "Every day of an unending existence. The memories always as fresh and painful as though it happened yesterday. Because of your sister."

"No." Nick did not want to believe it. "No."

"*Ecoute, mon cher*, you did not lose all human feeling, all human emotion by becoming a vampire, non? If you had, you would not always be so troubled. Look at yourself, Nicholas, without that idiotic self-pity. You love and are loved, you show kindness and compassion to others, you defend the helpless - *ma foi*, how much more human could you be? Think of your bloodlust as-- how would one put it today?-- as a disability you have to live with. No more."

Nick stared curiously at her. "Do you feel a part of humanity, Janette?" He suddenly wondered that he had never asked her before.

She shrugged. "At times. Though it would be more accurate to say I feel connected to humanity. Now. Are you still paying attention?"

He mutely nodded.

"Good. Just as you did not completely lose your humanity, *mon cher*, neither did LaCroix. But, unlike you, he desperately wants to lose it. His humanity has brought him nothing but constant sorrow and hopeless longing. If he were not so strong, he would have walked into the sunlight centuries ago to escape the pain. And even as you have struggled to regain your ties to humanity, LaCroix has struggled to destroy his, hoping thus to end his torment. He did not want to love your sister. It violated everything he believed about life as a vampire. Nevertheless, it happened. And he has struggled with it ever since. With utter futility." She studied Nick intently, relieved to find that for once he seemed to be listening.

"You overflow with compassion for the flotsam of humanity. Can you not spare even a little of that same compassion for the man who made you?"

"He wouldn't want it," Nick defended, suddenly feeling guilty, and angrily trying to shake off the feeling.

"No," Janette agreed. "He would not. But he needs it, nonetheless. Whether or not he acknowledges that fact." She rose to her feet and searched behind the bar for another bottle of her private stock. "I'd better bring him another bottle. He's probably drained that one by now. He's trying to fall asleep, but you know how difficult it is for our kind to sleep at night."

Nicholas remained seated, thinking about what Janette had told him. He found it very disturbing, but was unsure of precisely what he was feeling. Or of how he ought to respond.

"Now, Nicholas. I am going back in there. You may come with me if you promise to behave. Or go home. But if you upset him again tonight, I shall be very angry with you, *mon cher*." She spoke lightly, but there was no mistaking the warning she conveyed.

"I understand," Nick said quietly. He rose from the stool and walked to her. "Thanks, Janette." His lips softly brushed her cheek.

LaCroix had not moved since they left. The only change was the now-empty bottle that sat on the table. He looked up uncuriously as they returned.

"I thought you might be ready for more wine," Janette explained.

LaCroix smiled bitterly. "Your timing is excellent, my dear. I was about to call you." He looked beyond her to where Nicholas loitered by the entry, still wondering what he should do.

"What are you still doing here?" his elder demanded. "I thought you'd belong gone by now."

"I was talking with Janette," Nick replied. He hesitated, then resolutely walked over to the table and seated himself across from his mentor. "Are you all right?"

LaCroix stared at him scornfully. "This sudden concern for my well-being is touching, Nicholas. And quite unbelievable. What do you want? I've told you your precious mortal is safe from my attentions. What further assurances do you seek?"

"None. I don't want anything," Nick rejoined. "I just... I've never seen you like this before."

"Of course not. I have never found it the least bit fulfilling to be the object of someone's else's entertainment. Go home, Nicholas."

"I'd rather stay. If you don't mind my company." He spoke diffidently, feeling his way. They didn't usually converse in this fashion, and he didn't yet know the rules.

"Suit yourself. You always do. Have a drink. Oh, that's right, I forgot. You don't indulge." LaCroix spoke with the same bitter sarcasm he had exhibited earlier.

Nick hesitated. "Perhaps this once. Janette? Would you get me a glass, please?"

Janette's eyebrows raised, but she said nothing as she returned with a third glass.

"Allow me." Nick filled LaCroix's glass, then Janette's, and finally his own. His taste buds fairly danced with delight at the unexpected treat, which was the main reason he avoided the well-remembered combination. It was too easy to fall back into old habits.

LaCroix took a healthy swallow, then replaced the half filled glass on the table. "All right, Nicholas. What's going on? Has Janette been telling you stories?" He stared darkly at her, and she glared right back.

"No, not really. I've just been thinking."

"Really? You, Nicholas? Thinking? Remind me to note the date." Nick frowned at his mentor's sarcasm. "Thinking about what?"

"This and that. You... me... us. About what happened earlier tonight. And what happened 800 years ago."

"And? Did this thinking accomplish anything?"

"I think so. I realized some things."

"Such as?"

"I realized you loved my sister."

LaCroix blinked in surprise. "It took 800 years for you to figure that out?"

Nick shrugged as he sipped his wine. "I didn't want to figure it out before." He hesitated. "I'm sorry, LaCroix."

LaCroix emptied his glass and refilled it. "Why should you be? You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"I suppose so. I guess I wish things could have worked out differently, that's all." He studied his mentor, trying to guess his thoughts. "There's something else I have to tell you. I lied to you tonight. I think I do love Natalie." He

waited for LaCroix to respond, but the vampire master just sat there thoughtfully watching him. "I also repudiate the bargain we made back then. I will not let you take her. But I thought you should know the truth."

LaCroix nodded. "It doesn't really matter, you know."

"It doesn't?" Nick said in surprise. "Why not?"

"Because, my dear Nicholas, you face the same problem Fleur and I had. You are a vampire, and she is mortal. She will die, and you will not. Unless, of course, you decide to bring her across."

"No." The word came out more strongly than Nick had intended. "Never."

"Even if she wants it? Which I think she may?" LaCroix challenged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Either way, I shall have my revenge soon enough. Without need of enforcing our bargain."

"We may find a cure," Nick protested. "New drugs, new serums are discovered every day."

"There is no cure," LaCroix asserted calmly. "But you may amuse yourself by searching for one, if you like. With all eternity at your command, a little time wasted hardly matters."

"Nat and I will find a cure."

"You're deluding yourself, Nicholas. It isn't going to happen. The two of you will have little enough time together as it is. If I were you, I wouldn't waste it on idle dreaming."

Nick stared at LaCroix, wondering if he had understood him correctly. "Then you don't mind about Natalie and me?"

LaCroix glared at him. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I mind. I simply don't see anything to be gained by interfering. As I said, my revenge will come soon enough. I can afford to wait."

"Thanks, LaCroix." For the first time in centuries, Nick felt kindly disposed toward the vampire master. "I appreciate it."

"Don't appreciate it," LaCroix said coldly. "I'm not doing you a favor, Nicholas."

"Thanks anyway." He looked around as his vampire's warning system alerted him to the approaching dawn. "I'd better go. Are you staying here?"

LaCroix nodded. "I think I'll take advantage of Janette's hospitality for one more day. Go. You probably have a busy night planned and need the rest."

"Busy night?"

"I assume that you gave Miss Lambert some pleasant memories of the dinner with you she never had. She'll probably want to pick up where you left off..." His voice trailed off at the sight of Nick's stricken expression. "You didn't, did you?"

"I forgot. I was so busy worrying about whether you were following us and whether you would come back..." He winced. What would Natalie think when she awoke and couldn't remember what happened?

"Nicholas, Nicholas...What am I to do with you?" LaCroix lightly admonished him, shaking his head. "Will you never remember your lessons?"

To his surprise, Nicholas smiled at him. LaCroix almost recoiled in reaction; he couldn't immediately recall the last time that had happened. Late sixteenth century, perhaps. "You're feeling better," Nick suggested.

LaCroix considered thoughtfully. "Yes. I suppose I am. Can't imagine why, really.". He looked to Janette, but she too merely smiled. He shrugged it off as unimportant. Perhaps it was the passing of Valentine's Day for another year. With daylight approaching, the wine was finally having its intended effect and he was growing sleepy. He frowned at his son, who was still dallying about for some reason. "Good night, Nicholas," he said pointedly.

Nick planted a friendly farewell kiss on Janette's lips. "Good night, Janette." He hesitated for a moment. "Good night, LaCroix." He gave his mentor a quick hug and was out of there before the older vampire knew what had happened. LaCroix stared at Janette is total confusion. It had been even longer since the last time that had happened. "Absolutely mad."

She smiled tolerantly. "He's in love," she replied as though that explained everything. Which, perhaps, it did.

"Yes," LaCroix shook his head, pushing back the intrusive memories once again. "Poor, pathetic fool. I could almost feel sorry for him."

Somewhere in the Night

by L'Phantom

On the day I walked away
All the blue rolled into grey
Now in the dark, alone I lay
Should have stopped
But I could never, ever stay

I don't think I'll ever understand why I run. I guess I've been doing it for so long it's become a habit. With the Inca finally gone, I had to find someone else to run from. But why did it have to be Tracy Vetter?

It was after I recovered from the fever. The whole thing, watching Screed die, watching myself get weaker and weaker; it made me feel something I hadn't felt in nearly 500 years: my mortality. And Tracy was right there with me, watching it happen and not being able to stop it.

After I buried Screed, I left. I just left. I didn't take anything from the church, didn't bother to tie up loose ends; I just left. And in doing so, I left behind my beautiful Tracy.

I know she was never really "my" Tracy, but I gracually began to see her as such. *After* I left. After it was too late.

Somewhere in the night
Inside my dreams you burn so bright
And I'm with you there and everything's
all right
Somewhere in the night
Before the darkness turns to light
Let me love you there
Somewhere in the night

The dreams started exactly two weeks after I left. I see her standing on a hill, her arms widely outstretched.

"Come to me," I hear her say. As I close the gap between us, I see that she is more beautiful than I had ever seen her. I take her into my arms and hold her close to me.

"Tracy, I..." I start to say, but before I can say "love you," her body bursts into flames hotter than the sun. I always wake up as I feel my clothes begin to burn.

Second chances I won't get
Wouldn't dare to hope, and yet
Everywhere I turn I see your silhouette
Been so long
But I never will forget

I've never felt this way about a mortal before, and that scares the hell out of me. I have faced and slain countless men with swords, spears, and guns, and one little, naive, mortal girl scares me to death.

Death. Tracy thinks I'm dead. I know this, but why do I still expect her to be looking for me? Why is it that every young blond woman I see has her face?

Why do I hear her calling to me from every shadow? And why can I never get away?

Somewhere in the night
Inside my dreams you burn so bright
And I'm with you there and everything's
all right
Somewhere in the night
Before the darkness turns to light
Let me see your face
Feel your warm embrace
Let me love you...
Somewhere in the night

Tracy, I love you. Tracy, I hate you. Tracy, I need you. Tracy, be my Tracy, just for a century or so. I'm not dead, Tracy. At least, not any more than before. I'm not dead. But I'm scared, Trace. And I'm alone.

But you'll never know. Live your mortal life. Play your mortal games. Die your mortal death. And maybe, every so often, remember me. Because, in the end, you're the only one who will.

That Little Voice

by Sharon S. Scott

Work had been hell since Schanke's death. No one to torture him about his not eating; no one to get exasperated about his hunches; no one to wonder how he always got there first. No one to help him. No one to be his friend.

He certainly could have used Schanke's knowledge of fast food on this one. Four clerks in all-night fast food restaurants killed. All with the same weapon. The Chief had issued a warning to all 24-hour restaurants, but their owners weren't about to lose that late-night and early-morning trade, so the probability was high that the killings would continue.

If only Schanke were still here. To be shocked that Nick had never eaten a dipped cone or a double-cheese-double-meat Whataburger or an enchirito or an order of onion rings. If only ...

"I *am* here. Just open your ears and listen, would ya?"

What the hell? Where did that come from? He looked around the squad room, thinking maybe it had all been a big mistake, that Schanke was really alive and well.

No Schanke.

"Okay, guys and gals, that was *not* funny."

The guys and gals looked at him in surprise.

"So who's impersonating Schanke?"

The surprise turned to sideways glances.

"So *don't* admit it. Just don't do it again, okay?"

Murmurs as the officers went back to their duties.

He turned back to his desk and went back to reading the witness interviews.

"Schanke to Knight! Come in, Knight!"

Damn it, it *was* Schanke's voice. He whirled in his chair and stared at the assembled crew. They all stared back. It was obvious they thought he was stark raving bonkers.

Knight slowly turned his chair back around, put his elbows on the desk, lowered his head, and massaged his temples. Maybe he *was* going round the bend.

"It's me, Knight. Donald G. Schanke. I'm here. Are you there?"

Okay. He'd play this little game in his head and see where it went. "Yeah, Schanke, I'm here. Where are you?"

Heads went up around the room. One officer sidled into the new captain's office and shut the door.

"I'm right here, Knight, ol' buddy, ol' pal."

"Where?"

"Knight, go home." The Captain's hand on his shoulder was firm, as was his voice. "Go home. Take some time off. Get some rest."

"I'm fine, Captain. This case won't wait."

"Insubordination is a firing offense, Knight. Do as I say. Go home. Now."

"Yes, sir." Knight locked his desk and grabbed his jacket. "I'll be back after I've slept."

"You aren't listening to me. I'm worried about you--we're all worried about you. You just haven't been the same since Schanke died. We'll handle things without you. Get some rest. And get some help. You need it."

Great. Now the Captain thought he was losing his mind, too.

"Yes, sir."

He pretended not to hear the whispers as he left.

As he drove home, he told himself he was overtired, stressed-out, still working through the shock of Schanke and Cohen's deaths. Yeah, that was the ticket. Schanke was dead. They had identified him by his teeth and his wedding ring. Yes. Schanke was dead. He couldn't be ...

"Hey, Nicky-boy! How's tricks?"

Nick's head whipped right. That's where the voice was coming from. And that's where a tiny Schanke, complete with brown suit, Hushpuppies, and wings, was sitting. On his right shoulder.

The Caddy screeched across the street as he tried to control its skid. It missed a couple of cars, pedestrians, and a stop sign, jumped the curb, and finally came to a halt centimeters from a swing set in the park.

He gingerly removed his head from the broken side window and cautiously looked at his shoulder again. And screamed like a banshee.

The tiny figure was thrown to the dashboard, where it perched, flexing its wings and dusting itself off. "Are you through now? Hysterics over and done with? It's just me."

"You're dead, Schank. I went to your funeral. You're dead."

"And so are you, buddy! How come you never told me that little tidbit, huh? No, I was just your partner, your friend. But don't tell me any secrets! Don't tell me you're one of the bloodsucking undead! Noooooooo, don't tell *me* anything. Just let me wonder."

Nick massaged his temples again. "It's finally happened. I've lost it. I don't really see you. You're not really there. I'm just tired..."

"Oh, but I *am* here. And guess what I am? Three guesses!" The miniscule Schanke started doing somersaults across the dash. "Come on, guess! Man, oh, man, I've gotcha on this one!"

"You're definitely not Tinkerbell. You're a nighmare, right? A hallucination?"

"Wrong! I'm your brand-spanking new Conscience, that's what! I *knew* I had ya on this one! Assignment: Nicolas Knight--homicide detective, vampire, liar, thief."

"I need a drink."

"Uh, uh, Wonder Boy. It's my job to keep you on the straight and narrow. And don't think I'm happy about it. I

wanted to be assigned to Madonna, but they figured I wasn't up to that level yet, so this is what I got. I'll just have to make the best of it. Wanna see what else I can do?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, just you wait--I'll show you...oops! Hey, could you give me a hand, Nick? Dangling off your keychain isn't my idea of fun. I could get seriously hurt here."

"You've got wings--fly."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot! That's right--you know all about this flying stuff, don't ya? That's another beef I've got with you." Schanke's eyes closed in concentration, and then he started fluttering his wings mightily.

"What *are* you doing?"

"Gotta get her revved up!" And with two wings and a prayer, he let go of the keychain, almost falling to the floorboard, then went whizzing around Nick's ankle, up through the intricacies of the steering wheel, and landed smartly on the rearview mirror.

"Ta da!"

Nick closed his eyes and counted to ten, hoping like hell that this was a bad dream.

Nope, there was Schanke, perched on the rearview mirror, looking quite pleased with himself.

"So, pard, guess you're surprised to see me."

"That's an understatement. Something you weren't ever very good at in real life."

"Hey, no insults!"

"*You* called *me* a liar and a thief. Those aren't insults?"

Schanke frowned, crossed his legs, and carefully aligned the crease in his pants. "I'm allowed to insult you--I'm a guardian angel."

Nick closed his eyes again, and tried counting to twenty. Maybe this, too, would pass.

Nope. Still there.

"You're a guardian angel."

"Believe it."

"Yeah, and pigs can fly."

"Hey, the Pope's Polish. Anything can happen."

"And who are you supposed to be guarding? Me?"

Schanke smiled. "You got it."

"You're the same Don Schanke who ate like there was no tomorrow. The same Schanke who ogled every pretty woman in a 5-mile radius. Who went to the Raven to get...well, we both know what you went there for, don't we? I'm sure Alma remembers, even if you don't. Greed and lust are sins, Schank."

"Attack is the best defense? You won't get off that easily, Knight. I'm repaying my sins. That's why I'm still here, instead of with the Big Guy in the Sky. *You're* my punishment."

"Is there a possibility that you can explain that statement?"

"Can do, Kemo Sabe, can do. I've got a game plan. Orders, if you will." Schanke flew off the mirror and hovered squarely in front of Nick's face. "And you *will* listen to me. No more stupid excuses that a three year-old could see through. And absolutely, positively no more "Let's see how much Schanke will swallow." I've got your number now, pal. Sun allergy, my big fat..."

"Now, now, Schank. Remember, you're an angel now. No foul language allowed."

Jeez, now he was reprimanding his hallucination.

"Butt is a perfectly good word. And who are you to be telling me to mind my manners, I might ask?"

"Tsk, tsk. Bad language *and* getting in a snit--this is how an angel acts?"

"Minor sins. I *told* you I was being punished. And never fear, we'll get round to *your* sins later. Right now you'd better get home. The sun's about to peek over the horizon, and we wouldn't want you to go POOF, would we?"

And with a big grin and a tiny whoosh, Schanke disappeared.

He made it into the garage with seconds to spare. And sat, clenching the steering wheel with all his might.

<This isn't happening. It can't be. He's dead. I'm dreaming. I'm having an extended nightmare. It's not possible. But I swear I heard him. Saw him. With those ridiculous wings.>

His rather hysterical laughter bounced off the walls of the garage.

<Maybe I just got some bad blood...the Herefords got shot up with too many steroids. Or they got into the loco weed. Or maybe I'm a prime candidate for the Nut Hut.>

He got out of the car and headed for the elevator, walking as slowly as a 90 year-old mortal.

<Losing your mind is exhausting. Wonder if LaCroix knows a good vampire psychiatrist? Probably. But hey, if they're going to cart me off, I might as well enjoy myself. Drink the goodies in the refrigerator. And the stash in the fireplace. The extras in the bedroom closet. And the emergency rations in the niche behind the poster. I might even warm it up this time. Drink, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow...That can't be it. I'm already dead.>

Slamming the elevator door, he headed in a direct line, with all speed, for the refrigerator. Took out a full bottle, pulled the cork out with his teeth, spat it across the room, and held the green glass against his body to warm the liquid it contained. Then remembered that he was cold now, and cursed himself and Janette and LaCroix.

<Janette, Janette. You've left me again. Left me to LaCroix's not-so-tender mercies. You can leave, and he won't hunt you, track you down. Why can't he do the same for me? Janette...to our everlasting, neverending health>

He lifted the bottle to his lips, opened them to receive the hated contents, and saw Schanke standing on the tip of the upended bottle.

"Naughty, naughty!"

Schanke hovered in mid-air as the bottle flew across the room and smashed against the wall.

"Damn you, Schanke!"

Nick backed away from the refrigerator. Schanke remained in the same place.

"Shut the door, Nick. You're wasting electricity."

"I'm drinking blood, and my guardian angel's worried about energy conservation."

"Waste not, want not, as we say up there."

"But you're here, not there. And just as a matter of information, *why* are you here?"

"Sit down, ol' buddy, and I'll tell you. Sit. Sit!"

Nick sat. Schanke buzzed the room, lighting on the carved bit on the mantle, then skittering away. "What is this thing, anyway? A lizard?"

"It's a dragon, Schank. Not a lizard."

"Well, whatever it is, it's weird. And don't think I don't know what Serena used it for. Jeez, Knight."

"How do you know about Serena?"

"I know most everything about you. It's all written down, like Santa's list. I know what you are, and I know what you've done. What I don't know is *why* you've done it."

"It's no business of yours what I've done or not done or when or to whom."

Schanke flitted over to the sofa and sat on the arm. "Oh, but that's where you're completely wrong, my friend. It's Their business, so it's my business."

"Their? Who are they?"

"Nicky, Nicky, you just don't get it, do you? They keep records. Every infraction of the rules, every single violation of the laws. It's all there, in black and white, or in red, in your case. Lots and lots of red. Centuries of red. Name after name after name. All the names of the dead who got that way because of you."

"I do know about those centuries. I lived through them. And I remember every one of the dead. Even the ones whose names I never knew."

"You've been a *bad* boy. You've taken babies from mothers, and fathers from sons, and lovers from lovers, and..."

"I know, Schanke, I know."

"But here's the thing, Nick. The crux of the matter. What I was sent for. My raison d'etre, as it were."

"Which is...?"

"They want to know why."

"Why what? Why I chose to become what I am?"

"Nah, they know that. They think your choice was really stupid, but you made it. It's over and done with. Can't be changed. They want to know why you want to become mortal again. That's what they want. They want answers. Honest, real, from-the-gut answers."

Nick looked away for a long moment. "That's not going to be easy."

"Nobody said it would be. But I'll tell you this. I'm with you till they get what they want. However long it takes. Convince me, Nick. Or I'll be here...forever."

One more *POP* *POP* *FIZZ* *FIZZ* from Schanke and he'd go mad. Flush him down the toilet. Call in Murphy Brown to get on his case. Take him to the zoo and feed him to the yak.

Feed him to Sydney. Now *there* was an idea.

POP while he was getting ready for work, shaving cream on his face and a straight razor right under his nose.

"Man, you look a hundred percent better when you shave. You oughta do it more often."

Luckily he healed quickly.

POP while he was driving to work, just beginning a flashback. "Ever think about taking a taxi when you're in this kind of mood?"

Another streetlight he'd have to pay for.

POP in the morgue, while listening to Nat's findings on the latest fast-food victim.

"Good thing people who are already dead don't interest you."

Nat asked where he'd found more litovuterine.

POP in front of the refrigerator, every time he took a bottle out. "Now you *know* you shouldn't be drinking that stuff."

It'd be nice if he could ever go back to walking around the loft barefooted.

POP at his desk, while he was explaining to Tracy how he got to the crime scene before anybody else.

"And you wonder why nobody wants to work with you. Sheesh."

Tracy asked for a new partner.

But the icing on the cake was when he was awakened from a deep sleep, twitching from his nightmares. Loud music. From downstairs. Schanke was on top of the piano, snapping his fingers and dancing to the blaring strains of "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?"

He flew down the stairs and turned off the stereo with an angry snap. "What the hell are you doing, Schanke? Rod Stewart? I'm trying to sleep!"

Schanke stopped dancing, a wounded look on his face.

"I'm *bored*. What d'ya want me to do while you're sleeping your life...excuse me...your unlife away? Dance on the head of a pin? Count the stars in the sky? Run my wings through a carwash?"

"Don't you have anything else to do? Anyone else to bother? What do you do when you're not annoying me?"

Schanke looked miffed. "Well, sometimes I go home and whisper sweet nothings in Myra's ear. Course, she doesn't hear them, since she snores like a grizzly, but... And I see that Jenny gets on the school bus okay, and make sure that little twerp Cody doesn't pull her pigtails. That kid needs a swift kick in the...Other than that, I got nothing to do."

Nick sighed and went to the refrigerator for a quick nip. He couldn't bear Schanke's wounded puppy look.

"Nick, when are you gonna quit slurping that stuff? It's a real downer, man."

"Sorry if I offend you. It's what I do. It's what I am."

"But it's so *gross*. Blood. It's revolting."

It was going to be a long day. He took the bottle and a glass and sat on the sofa. "Are you telling me you never ingest blood?"

Schanke's grimace was more than enough answer.

"Think again--every time you eat a steak, or a pot roast, or a hamburger. Beef has blood in it, Schank. Blood is blood--I just have mine fresh instead of cooked."

"It's not the same thing."

"It *is* the same thing. Think about it."

Schanke steepled his fingers and thought. And thought.

"You know what, Knight? This is a really scary thought, but you're right. You're absolutely right."

"And why is that scary?"

"Because you're so wrong about so many things."

"Like?"

"Oh, I don't know...Janette? She loves you, man. That's why she left."

"She left because she loves me? Give your wings a shake, Schanke. That doesn't make sense."

"I'm not Mr. Spock--I don't have to be logical. But it's the truth. She just couldn't take it anymore. She loves you, Nick, and *not* like a brother. I can guarantee that. Geez, can I guarantee that."

"That's my business, and hers. Not yours."

"So why do *you* think she left? You didn't buy LaCroix's lies about her being bored, did you?"

"Of course not. Some new infatuation, maybe?"

Schanke shook his head in disbelief. "An *old* infatuation. *You*. She couldn't stand by any longer and watch you fall more in love with Nat every day. That's why she left."

"That's none of your business, either."

"Oh, but it is." Schanke flew over to the fireplace and settled himself on the mantel. "Okay, Nick, enough fooling around. I want answers. *They* want answers. And you're going to give them to me. It's truth or consequences time."

"Okay, amigo--question numero uno. Do you love Janette?"

Schanke settled himself comfortably and waited for Nick to explode. Which he did.

"That's none of your damn business, Schanke. I don't care ifyou *are* an angel, or an angel-wannabe, or whatever you are."

Schanke watched Nick head straight for the refrigerator and the bottle waiting there. Then watched him gulp a glassful and pour another.

"I've got forever, Nick. I can wait." Schanke leaned back, put his hands behind his head, and waited.

"Forever?"

"Forever. And I don't have to worry about fire, or a stakethrough the heart, or decapitation, or the sun. Who's the superior being now?"

Nick looked skyward and asked, "What did I do to deserve this?"

Schanke smiled. "Oh, about 700 years of killing. And another hundred of wanting to."

"I'm paying for my sins. Am I *ever* paying."

"So answer the question. Do you love Janette?"

"You aren't going to go away, are you?"

"Nope." A smug smile adorned Schanke's face.

"Then the answer is yes. I love Janette."

"Then can you explain to me why the hell you're making a play for Natalie? Cause I really want to understand. She probably does, too."

Nick glared. Schanke glared back. "Answers, Nick. I want answers. *Honest* answers. And I don't leave till I get 'em."

"Schanke, you won't understand. It's complicated."

"Try me."

Nick sighed, put down the glass, and began to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. "I've loved Janette for centuries. I still love her. But she's part of what I'm attempting not to be anymore. I have to put that love in a place that's separate from my life *now*. Turn it into friendship, if that's possible. I'm not sure it is."

"So what about Nat?"

"Nat's what I want to be. Mortal. Human. A creature of the light."

Schanke laughed. "I dunno about that. She doesn't see much daylight, far as I can tell."

"I'm serious here, Schanke. She can walk down the street at 10 a.m. without spontaneously combusting. Something I can't do."

"Do you really want to?"

"Of course I do."

"You say so, but I'm wondering if that's just lip service."

Picking up the glass, Nick crossed to the fireplace and held it in front of Schanke's face. "Do you think I'd be drinking *this* if I wasn't serious? Do you have any idea how lousy cow blood is, compared to the real thing? No, you don't-- you couldn't possibly know."

"Well, I've had lite beer."

"That's a feeble comparison."

"I know that. Do you think I'm an idiot? Do you, Nick?"

"Of course not, Schanke."

"Good. That wasn't one of the official questions, but it's nice to know. But the official question is... do you love Nat?"

"I...I'm attracted to her. I *could* love her...but I *can't*. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. You don't want her to be a meal, right?"

Nick looked at Schanke, thinking maybe he was kidding. He wasn't. "That's a gross simplification, but essentially true. I don't want to kill her. And I'm afraid I would."

Schanke hesitated, then asked, "What are you most afraid of, Nick? What makes you wake up in a cold sweat?"

"The thought that I'll be like this for eternity. That I'll never find a way back across."

"What I can't figure is *why* you've got this itch to be mortal again. Hey, man, you can *fly*! You can zap people into believing whatever you want 'em to believe. You're gonna live forever. What's the big deal about being human?"

"So I won't have to drink blood to live anymore. So I won't have to fight the urge to kill. So I won't have to answer to LaCroix for the rest of my existence."

"Yeah, but what's the *real* reason?"

"That's not enough? What do you want, Schank?"

"I want the truth. It's in there somewhere."

Nick opened the shutters, and stared into the sunset. "Warmth. I want to be warm again. I want warmth instead of ice in my veins. I want the heat of the sun, burning away this cold in my soul and in my body. I want the warmth of love given and received. The warmth of the Light, and what's beyond it. I'm tired of being cold." He turned and looked questioningly at Schanke. "Do you think it'll everhappen?"

"Maybe."

"That's no answer."

"It's the only one I've got, friend."

"Well, Nick, my work here is done. A caveat before I leave-- don't give up. Keep hoping. And keep trying. And keep working on that conscience. It's gotten rusty and dull. You need to make it as sharp as those teeth of yours."

"Nat's my conscience."

"No, Nick. You make your own decisions. You have to be your *own* conscience. Nat can't do that for you. Neither can LaCroix. *You* are responsible for yourself. You'll remember that?"

"I'll try."

"And keep in mind that if you do a major backslide again, I may be back. Later, dude!" And with that, he flew up the chimney like Santa Claus, the only sign he'd ever been there a tiny feather falling onto the grate.

"Later? LATER? SCHANK? WHAT DOES "LATER" MEAN?"

He searched the chimney for signs of the Hushpuppied One, then sighed and stood up. Crossing to the refrigerator

again, he mumbled, "I may have to *really* re-invent myself if Schanke's going to be on my case forever."

He was startled out of his monologue by three short,polite, perfectly-spaced rings of the door buzzer. Wearily, he punched the button for the monitor and stepped back to see who was there.

Perfect. A giant white rabbit, wearing a hat and topcoat, and carrying an umbrella.

"Nicolas Knight?"

Oh, why *not*? Made as much sense as Schanke with wings. "Yes, I'm Nick Knight."

"Pardon the intrusion, but a mutual friend, Mr. Donald G. Schanke, thought you might need me. And I'm a Pooka, actually. Not a rabbit. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Harvey."

Leonardo Paints

by CousinCP

"You ask me how it is that I came to have my portrait painted by Leonardo? Why not? Am I not beautiful? Are we not all of us beautiful to the extent that any mortal man would want to gaze on our beauty for all time? But how could it be that THE Leonardo da Vinci could paint my portrait? Moi, Janette du Charme, by blood a simple country girl of a minor degree of nobility.

And then again by blood, a member of a much older, more select family. A creature of the night, immortal. Vampire.

It is a story I have never told you, though an interesting one--if I do say it. It is rather ironic, don't you think, that one of our kind should be immortalized by a mortal--instead of the other way round? I will try to be brief, though the story is a long one. A very long one indeed. Come, sit by the fire. Pour yourself a drink. It is a very special vintage. Rather precocious, but it finishes well. I think you will enjoy it. Make yourself comfortable.

Where shall I begin?

I was lost. Not in direction, for I had no particular direction to be lost from. I was looking for a direction. I had recently decided to pursue my own interests. To strike out on my own. To leave my master and my lover. To leave the nest, as you might say, to try my wings.

I sought out the gaiety of life at court.

It was Paris in the 1490ís. After decades upon decades of traveling with my Master, LaCroix, and then also with my vampire "brother" Nicola (whom I had taken for my lover), I decided to return to Paris. As you can imagine, I found it very much changed. A city can change tremendously in one decade; I had been gone for almost twenty.

I was cautious in those days. Sometimes to the point of starvation. In all my wanderings about Paris, I never encountered any others of our kind. I felt this oddly curious, but at the same time satisfying. I never let it make me careless, though. I took a rather haughty delight, I must say, in being one-of-a-kind. Unique. Special.

I was enjoying very much the life at court. I wanted nothing to spoil it. At times I would wander far into the country to hunt and feed, if I fed at all. Some nights I would venture into the seedy parts of the town, into raucous, anonymous little bars where, disguised as a common woman, I could be certain no one would recognize me. And I would pretend to drink their meager wine, sing their songs, maybe have a dance or two.

And then, in my own good time I would satisfy my hunger, still always cautious.

After a time, I persuaded a young nobleman to take me into his circle of friends, to make the proper introductions. I believe you know what I mean when I use the word "persuade".

I had assumed the identity of a wealthy widow, Madame de Berry. I had rented a lovely, rather opulent house and had maidservants and coachmen. I entertained frequently, giving lavish dinner parties. The wine and meat were always the finest. I made certain of this although, of course, I would only occasionally have a small sip of the wine. Those of our kind, we prefer a richer vintage.

I see you smile, and I know you concur.

There was always music and laughter...and gambling. Always fun to gamble with mortals whose thoughts you could read. Not like cheating! It still takes skill to play the cards properly. And I am always careful to lose just enough to avoid suspicion.

I even entertained several proposals of marriage. Yes! The first one was such a shock that I must confess I laughed out loud. The poor man was humiliated beyond words. I had to console him and comfort him. I had not meant to insult him. Luckily, I was able to make him forget his embarrassment. Indeed, he "forgot" the entire episode.

Anyway, after a brief time it came to pass that I met Louis, the Duke of Orleans. Louis was a very handsome man and kind. When I met him, I instantly felt a kind of common bond with him. Here was a man I felt I could trust. This feeling was something I had not known for an interminably long time.

We would sit for hours and talk of philosophy, religion, politics. I suppose I should say he talked. I listened, sometimes impatiently, for as I'm sure you can agree the affairs of mortal men sometimes have very little significance to our kind. Empires come and go and exert little influence on immortals.

And also the hunger would sometimes rise up in me and I would become desperate to feed. But until such time, I would listen, enthralled with his ideas and the power of his convictions.

He told me once that he had been in prison for three years over some squabble with his cousin Charles. This is what he told me and how he said it. In my naivete, I thought that he meant some sort of brawl had caused a minor loss of property. How could I have imagined the truth?

Yes, I was at court, but he had merely been introduced to me as Louis, the Duke of Orleans. In my ignorance, I never made the connection. It later came to be one of my most valuable lessons: be sure you know with whom it is that you are dealing.

It occurred to me on more than one occasion that my friend Louis might make an excellent companion for me, for all time, and I considered the possibility of making him

mine. Bringing him across. But something always made me stop.

Perhaps it was that this lesson had never been completely taught to me. I knew all the theory, but the actual practice, LaCroix had told me, was almost an art form in itself. And one that at my young age of only a few hundred years, he never saw fit to allow me to practice.

Besides, Louis seemed somehow too good, too kind. He seemed destined for other, perhaps greater, things. I have always believed that the world would be a better place with men like Louis in it. Don't you agree? And this, as it happened, was exactly the truth.

In case you haven't figured it out by now, the cousin Charles turned out to be Charles VIII, King of France. And the "squabble" that had earlier sent Louis to prison turned out to be his attempt to take the throne. The following year, my friend Louis was crowned King Louis XII of France.

Well! You may think I digress, but as I said it is a long story how I came to meet Leonardo. He was, after all in Italy, and my story has not yet taken me out of France. Allow me to continue.

The year was 1498. Louis had just become Louis XII, and he desired a new wife. From Rome was sent Cesare Borgia, official emmisary of his father, Pope Alexander VI, bearing the annulment which would make Louis' first marriage disappear.

Although these two men were remarkably different in demeanor, temperament, and beliefs, they instantly struck up a bond, a friendship. They would spend hours together talking, making plans. They were often seen together at the theatre or the opera. I would sometimes accompany them or meet them there. Our social circles would often entwine.

Frequently they would come to my house at the close of the evening, along with other of our mutual acquaintances. In fact, it was at my fireside that they hatched the plan to invade Italy.

Later that night, after the invasion plans were given birth, Cesare and I decided I would also go to Italy. We had become very close and would sometimes talk, laugh, and joke until the early hours of the morning. How can this be, you ask? How could I be so close to him, spend so much time with him and yet not reveal myself, either by intent or accident? Did he not know, did he not guess what I am? Never! I told you, I was very cautious in those days.

Cesare was very different from any other man I had known. And he was drop-dead gorgeous, as they say these days. I was intensely attracted to him and on more than one occasion I considered, as I had with Louis, the logistics of making him mine forever. Again I hesitated, lacking the confidence in my ability to make another of our kind.

He defied convention, and this touched my rebel's heart. This was a great part of his charm. He spat in the face of morals and rules, and yet he was able to befriend men as kind and just as Louis. He was also completely trustworthy, in his way. If he said he intended to kill you, you had better set your affairs in order. And if he said he would die for you, that was exactly what you could depend upon. He made such a vow of loyalty to Louis, and so I allowed him to continue his mortal life. And then we started off for Italy.

Milan. 1499. This is where I met Leonardo. This is also where my association with Louis and Cesare came to a temporary end, as they had a full-time job just conquering the region. The exact details of the battle that broke out when they entered Milan are insignificant to my story and can all be had in any reputable history book. I am certain that if you are interested, there would be a much more accurate account than what I could offer. My views of mortal history--although sometimes first-hand--are always somewhat, shall we say, slanted. I see what I want to see, as I am certain you can understand.

Leonardo. What can I say about Leonardo? He was one of the most intelligent men I have ever met. A bit eccentric, perhaps, as are all extremely intelligent individuals. They have a bit of trouble relating to us common intellects. One time I allowed myself to listen in on his thoughts, out of curiousity. I was amazed and almost overwhelmed at all the noise rattling around in that wonderful brain of his! It's no wonder he seemed a bit distracted at times with all those ideas going round in his head.

Leonardo! He was in his late 40s when I met him. He reminded me somewhat of my father, whom I had not thought of in so many years. So many. My father, whom I had never quite been able to please or make proud of me, as he had been proud of my brothers. My father, who had arranged my marriage which later failed, which is how I came to be in a brothel in Paris, which is where I met LaCroix. My father...but then, that is another story.

He had been in the service of Duke Sforza in Milan. The duke fled the country when Louis and Cesare's troops invaded, as did many of the court. Both Louis and more particularly Cesare knew of Leonardo as one of the great artists and intellects of the region; in fact, of the time. I was certain they had no intention of harming him, but neither did they want him in the country at present. A country at war has little need of the arts. Better he should return later to build the monuments to the conquering heroes.

One of the last times I saw Louis was when he and Cesare introduced me to Leonardo. From the first moment I met Leonardo, I felt that he somehow knew everything about me. It was most disconcerting. He had a keen eye, and a rather annoying habit of staring. I later came to know that he was such an ardent observer that he often would become so intent on his subject as to have little regard for his or her feelings. After all, his subject was often a tree, a machine, or as I later came to know all too well, a corpse.

He reminded me a little of LaCroix in the way that he would observe silently for a time and then, when least expected, would bring forth an extremely astute, often impudent observation. His manner was not so cold as LaCroix, however. Leonardo was in the world but not of it, if you catch my meaning. LaCroix, on the other hand, is in the world only when he chooses to be or has to be. He prefers to keep his distance. It helps him keep perspective.

But I am so sorry! I continue to digress. Please, freshen your drink while I collect my thoughts.

Hmmm. The second time I saw Leonardo, I had sought him out. I longed to learn more about him. I wanted to know if my sense had been correct, that he had somehow discerned that I was not quite--normal. That I was something more than human. He was packing, preparing to leave, as ordered--or was it requested?--by Louis. We sat and talked for a time, exchanging pleasantries and getting acquainted. He told me that if only he had known me a few

years earlier, I should have modeled for a painting he had just completed.

This had been the cause of the interest he had shown in me. I could read in his thoughts that he had no suspicions about my nature. He was only interested in me as a subject for a painting.

Indeed, he became very animated in insisting that I should pose for a portrait. It must be the very next day, as soon as it was light! We must begin without delay, as he was being forced to leave the region. I must admit I laughed out loud at the prospect. In the daylight, imagine! If only he could know how ridiculous that was, how out of the question. He frowned when I laughed at him and became more insistent. I explained that it was quite impossible as I never go out in the light of day. I claimed, as I often do, that this was an eccentricity of mine. I explained that it was my belief that the sun has a terrible aging effect on my delicate skin, and I had vowed never to subject myself to that abuse.

You laugh! Hmmmph. But it works. You should try it. Now, you know, we can blame the ozone or some such environmental concern. It works much to our advantage.

Anyway, his face and his manner suggested that he was almost inclined to believe what I was saying to him--but not completely. And it did not stop him from imploring me to sit for him. I could see that he must be mentally working out the possibility that he would have to paint a portrait by candle or fire light if he wanted to paint me, and I knew that he would love to accept such a challenge. He was a great problem solver and innovator. He loved a good fight, and he always gave it everything he had.

During the course of our conversation, I found out that he was bound for Florence by way of Mantua and Venice. I decided I wanted more of his company, as I found him so very interesting and charming. I told him that by happy coincidence, I too was bound for Florence. I would be most pleased if I could visit him again in Mantua, and Venice, and Florence.

He suggested that we travel together. We could share a coach. Surely this would not betray my vow to never go out in the daylight. I must certainly travel by day, as no one traveled by night. It was too unsafe.

I smiled at his insistence and his notions. How could he know how very different our lives are from those of mortal men? Hmmm.

He was so demanding that I felt I could almost do as he suggested. Why could I not travel by day? With dark curtains on the coach...But then the reality of it came thankfully to bring me to my senses. What if I should fall asleep in his company? What a shock that would be! I might even wake up and find myself in a coffin, presumed dead and hastily buried! Mon Dieu! I shudder at the thought!

I thanked him most kindly for his offer, but made my excuses that I did indeed travel by night. I would be fine. I would meet him again in Mantua and Venice, then in Florence. And I would be glad to sit for him, should he like to paint my portrait. Only it must not be in the day.

He stared at me for a long moment...perplexed, I could tell. Then, slowly, he smiled and nodded slightly. 'Well, then, dear lady,' he said 'I shall be most glad to see you again and delighted that you will sit for me.'

I was there in Mantua when he arrived. I had, of course, chosen our faster mode of traveling by air and arrived days ahead of him. He was amazed to learn I was there before him. I did not bother to offer explanations as I desired to keep him curious.

It was in Mantua that he made a first sketch of me. Indeed, I expressed some curiousity about the sketch and he told me that he often made rough drawings of many varied subjects. It sometimes helped him to gather his thoughts. Today we would call it 'doodling', but in those times paper was a precious commodity. It seemed quite extravagant to gather one's thoughts thus.

On we went to Venice. I arrived there before him, naturally--or should I say un-naturally! Anyway, the city was a delight. I had never seen anything quite like it and I found it most interesting. Leonardo told me on the first night I saw him in Venice that he would like to begin my portrait. Or to at least experiment with pigments and poses by candle light. I agreed. He filled the room with candles and built up the fire very bright indeed. Then he began mixing his pigments. I could see him at times frowning deeply, lost in thoughts. Finally, towards midnight, he touched brush to canvas. Only once. Then he stood back and stared at it, frowning again, for a very long time.

He moved the easel, moved some candles, moved my chair, then began again. And again it was brush to canvas then frowning and staring.

By then it had been hours. I felt ravenous hunger and I told him that I must retire to my rooms for a refreshment. I could return in an hour, if he would like to try again.

He snapped out of his thoughts and offered me wine and bread. Couldn't I stay for just a while longer? He really thought he was beginning to figure it all out.

I thanked him sweetly, but told him I simply must have some time to myself. I was sure he must understand that a lady has needs to be attended to. He blushed slightly at this, and I smiled behind my hand. He was so boyish in many ways. A very charming trait.

When I left him, I walked for some distance. Such a beautiful evening. Cloudless and cool. Not many people about at such a late hour. Eventually I came upon a tavern open late in a rough part of the city. I went in and encountered a very friendly not-too-young man desirous of some company. I left with him directly and in a nearby alleyway I sunk my fangs into his filthy, chubby neck. The blood shimmered inside me and warmed me, more so since he had been drinking heavily. It made me giddy and very merry.

His life had been full, but lately sad. I experienced it all as I drained it from him, then I disposed of the body. I walked around for a while longer, delighting in the beauty of the night and remembering the experiences I had shared through the taking of the blood. Eventually I went back to Leonardo.

When I re-entered his rooms, I found him sitting sullenly by the fire. As I walked in, he looked at me as if I were some creature he had never seen before. I was instantly struck with a fear I had not known before, and I searched his thoughts for the reason of it.

It seems he had followed me when I left his rooms. Not exactly intending to spy on me, he merely happened to be walking in the same direction at not too great a distance behind me. He had seen me enter and then leave the tavern. Curiousity had forced him to follow me and the man into

the alleyway where he had seen what he should never have seen. He saw me take the blood and take the life and dispose of the remains. 'Be at ease.í I told him,' sensing his fear. 'I will not harm you. I can make you forget what you have seen. You must forget. No mortal can know about us.'

He stared at me, bolder now. His scientific mind was aroused at the prospect of a discovery such as no one else had ever made. 'Do not, I pray you, make me forget. I wish to remember, to know more about you. What you are and where you came from. Tell me, please, so that I may understand.'

I see you are shocked at what you are hearing. Believe me, I was shocked as well. Even more so when I tried to erase his memories of the events and found I could not! Yes, Leonardo was one of those rare mortals whose thoughts cannot be penetrated by us, or at least by me. Perhaps one older and more experienced...such as LaCroix...would have been able to deal with it, but he was not there and I was not able to do so.

And now you are truly appalled. Allow me to continue my story. It gets still more interesting.

Since I was not able to erase the events of the evening from his thoughts, Leonardo began to weary me with thousands of questions about our kind. He wanted to know literally everything that I knew about vampires. I feared that

I would have to kill him, and so I saw no harm in indulging what amounted to his last wishes. I told him everything I knew or had ever heard. Every truth or half-truth or suspected truth poured forth from my lips. Occasionally I would again try to mesmerize him and gain control of his mind, but I could not. It was more the contrary, as though he had control of my mind!

Then, after he was silent for a few thoughtful moments, he spoke. ëBut the bodies, signora. What a waste to simply dispose of them!í

I could see he recognized my amazement at this comment.

'What I mean, signora, is that I have often desired to know how the heart beats and the blood flows. Do you not wonder? If one could only study and examine the heart, to actually see it beating. To see the veins that the blood flows through. Perhaps even to see that blood flowing. What a wondrous machine this body is! Have you never seen a beating heart, signora? Seen it as it beats its last? What a wonder that would be! You, who find the beating heart so essential to your survival and yet you have never seen the thing.'

I began to suspect that he meant to try and strike some kind of bargain with me. It was his tone and his manner. He was charming me as I might have tried to charm him, to gain his trust, and then prey upon him. I began to fear where this was leading.

He continued. What he proposed was appalling to me and even, perhaps, a little depraved. He would keep my secret, he vowed, but it would not be without cost. He must be allowed to...examine...and study...the remains.

So much for my extreme caution! All was lost, it seemed. How was I to escape from this web he was weaving? I did not desire to kill him. You will recall that I feel the world is a much better place with the really great men allowed to live in it. Leonardo was a really great man. A bit odd, perhaps even macabre. But it could not be denied that he was a great man and destined for great things.

I decided to indulge him.

Now I know you cannot believe your ears. I see the look on your face. I know. It is not to be allowed. And yet, I did allow it! I hesitate to tell you for just how long I allowed it to continue. Let us simply say that some of the dates attributed to Leonardo's anatomical studies are...inaccurate.

You may know that the details about where he obtained the cadavers for these studies have always been subject to speculation. Well, I can only say that for the two years our association continued--from that night in Venice, on to his home of Florence, until his return to Milan--I...shall we say...kept him...busy.

He filled notebook after notebook with sketches of the internal workings of the human body. Sometimes he would lose patience with his inability to understand what he was seeing. He wanted not only to chronicle, but to interpret and explain what was what, and what it all meant. His insight put him years...decades!...ahead of conventional scientific discovery. He had no interest in making his notebooks public, however. It seemed to be enough for him to have the knowledge for himself.

On one occasion I saw him, in a fit of frustration, toss an entire notebook into the fire. Weeks of work were destroyed. He paced and swore and finally sat before the fire watching the curling embers of the pages turning into ash before his eyes. I remember touching him lightly on the shoulder, reassuring him, telling him that perhaps we could begin again.

That was the night he finished my portrait. He had only barely begun it, as you recall, when we began our grisly joint venture into scientific studies. Well, he painted constantly that night, with wild, stabbing brush strokes. He was as a man possessed.

Just before dawn, he threw down his brush and threw himself into a chair before the last coals of the dying fire. He completely ignored me and I believe that he perhaps dozed or collapsed then. I quietly crept around to catch a glimpse of the portrait and was amazed at what I saw.

He painted me as he no doubt saw me. Not as the mirror showed me, but more than any mirror could show. And less. What I saw was a heartless, bloodless fiend of the night. Beautiful and yet horrible. Appearing human, yet not human. A woman, yet not a woman. I could see in the work that he despised me for what I was. And loved me for it.

It was then that I knew our association must end. I knew I had to leave him. If I did not leave, one of us would have to die, and I did not intend for that one to be me. He did not know where I slept, but I knew that he could find out if he wanted to. And in learning the location of my lair, he would be able to dispatch me if he should choose to do so.

I fooled myself in thinking I was still cautious, as I have said I was in that era. But I had become careless in my close association with Leonardo. Whenever we allow ourselves to become close to a mortal, we take our lives in our hands. After all, they can go about in the day when we cannot. They can find us where we rest, so helpless. And if they choose to do so they can destroy us then.

I knew it was time for me to move on.

I never saw Leonardo again after that night. I left Florence and never returned. I did go back to Cesare for a time; I had missed him, and as he was the Duke of Romagna now, things had settled down for him considerably.

He was as fiery as ever and I greatly enjoyed his company. I found that this time was different with him, though. He began to be suspicious about me. About what I was. About what made me different from other women. It seems that my closeness with Leonardo had destroyed some barrier that I put up between myself and mortals. Or perhaps Cesare was simply being more attentive to me now--or more cautious.

Regardless of the reason, I knew that I must leave Cesare and never return to him. I made my excuses to him on our last night together. As I packed later that night, a knock came at my door. When I went to open it, I found my portrait by Leonardo sitting in the doorway. No one was there, and I could not sense the presence of anyone, whether mortal or vampire. It was as if the portrait had brought itself to my door, intending not to be left behind.

I packed it carefully, gratefully, and then set out to rediscover myself once again.

I kept it with me as you know for centuries until I saw fit to leave it to LaCroix as a sign of my love and faith. A message to him and to Nicola that they would not see me again soon. A thing to remember me by, should they choose to remember me at all.

And so! Now you know. It was a rather amusing tale to fill an hour before dinner, is that not so?

In the eternity that stretches before you, I am certain you will have opportunities to shape the future of mankind. Be most prudent! May you be so lucky as I was with Leonardo. May you be more cautious and wise. And always heed your master while you are young. Do not be too headstrong when...and if...you seek your independence. Remember, we must be ever vigilant in concealing our existence from mankind.

Did Leonardo ever speak of our kind to any living mortal? I do not believe so. I was never able to erase his knowledge of what I was, nor was any vampire that I know of aware of his knowledge of our existence. He guarded our secret as his own private treasure and carried it with him to his grave.

Now come, let us away into the night. The hour grows late and I am absolutely *starving*!"

Wall of Heartache

by Monica Fansler

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song,
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
--W.H. Auden

Hello, Father. It is good to see you again after so long a time.

What are you doing here?

You really shouldn't need to ask that. You already know that there is a great deal of concern in the community about your fledgling. This latest escapade of his has brought all of us dangerously close to exposure. He must stop this outrageous behavior immediately. I've been sent here to deal with the situation.

I have the situation, as you put it, well under control.

That's not what I've been told. No matter. I'm here to see for myself. I, at least, take my responsibilities very seriously.

Oh, I'm sure you do.

Months later, when she was able to force herself to think about it again, Natalie would remember that it had been raining the day she first met the little girl who would be responsible for so many changes in her life. And she would tell herself that it was that first sight of the child, standing in broad daylight in front of the Christmas display in the main window of the Bay, that prevented even her, of all people, from at least suspecting the truth.

It had been one of those gray days in early November that arrive after the perfect, crisp blue days of late October have gone. The sky had been heavy with fat clouds since early morning, threatening snow, but finally delivering only torrents of rain to the beleaguered humans below. It had been Natalie's day off, and feeling incredibly proud of her organizational skills and decision-making ability, she had abandoned her halfhearted house cleaning to begin her Christmas shopping.

The crowds had thinned when the weather turned wet, but Natalie enjoyed walking in the rain. Especially since she hadn't bought anything yet and didn't have to worry about getting her purchases wet. She walked down Bloor Street, on her way to serious shopping at the Bay, happily thinking about Gene Kelly. Waiting to cross at the corner of Yonge, she saw the girl standing outside the store's display window with her nose not-quite pressed up against the glass. She looked to be about twelve, and was very thin and very pale. But more than that, there was an air of loneliness about her that Natalie could sense from half a block away. The child looked as if she were utterly alone in the world.

She looked up from the display as Natalie approached. "Isn't it the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

"Yes, actually it's very pretty. Are you shopping with your mother?"

The girl lowered her eyes for a moment. "No, she's working. She works all the time."

"Oh, I see. You know, you really shouldn't talk to strangers like this, it could be dangerous."

The child smiled up at her, and Natalie felt as though the sun had suddenly come out. "I know, but you're all right. I could tell. Now don't try to tell me that I was wrong."

Natalie smiled back. "No, you weren't wrong. How about some hot chocolate to warm us up?"

The smile got ever broader. "Okay, if you promise to tell me all about yourself."

"I promise."

Natalie led the girl into a small diner down the street from the Bay. They settled into a booth in the back and ordered two double hot chocolates. Natalie smiled across at her companion. "You know, I didn't even ask you your name. I'm Natalie Lambert."

"I'm Diana Marcus. Pleased to meet you, Natalie Lambert. Do you have a nickname?"

"Well, a friend of mine calls me 'Nat.' Will that do?"

"Can I call you that, too?"

"I don't see why not."

Natalie's affirmative answer seemed to please the child, and she settled in deeper to the cushioned seat of the booth. "Now, tell me all about yourself."

Natalie launched into a brief synopsis of her life, noting with some amusement the way Diana's interest seemed to be piqued when she mentioned being a coroner. Bloodthirsty, just like most kids. "All right now, enough about me. Tell me about you."

"Well, there isn't much to tell. I'm twelve, I'm in seventh grade, and I took the long way home today and met you."

"You mentioned back there that your mother works all the time?"

"She has to, ever since my dad died."

"Oh, I'm sorry. When did that happen?"

"When I was five. I don't remember much about him. He traveled a lot on business. But I do know I was always glad to see him when he came home." Diana stared down into her hot chocolate. "Mom works in an office during the day. She's a secretary. At night she works as a waitress, so she's not home much." She looked imploringly up at Natalie. "It's really hard for her, being at work all the time, and I know she hates leaving me alone so much, but sometimes I just get so lonely." She lowered her head, and Natalie could hear the soft sounds of her crying.

Natalie was on the verge of tears herself. This poor child, pouring out her heart to a stranger because fate had dealt her a cruel blow. Although her childhood had been far more privileged than Diana's appeared to be, Natalie had also lost her beloved father at a relatively young age, and could empathize with the loss. She reached across the table and patted the girl's hand. "Don't be upset, Diana. I'm sure your mother loves you very much and is only trying to do what's best for you."

Diana, trying to corral what she obviously thought were the tattered remains of her dignity, nodded, sniffled, and looked up at Natalie. "I'm sure you're right, Dr. Nat. It's just...Sometimes, it kinda gets to me."

"Tell you what. I was going to stop in at my office on my way home to see if some lab results have come in yet. Why don't you come with me? I'll show you around, and when I'm done I'll take you home."

Diana brightened visibly. "Great, let's go!"

Laughing, Natalie paid the check and shepherded her out of the diner into the gathering darkness of the late autumn afternoon, never noticing the child's untouched mug of hot chocolate.

Fortunately, it had been a quiet day, and gave every indication that it was going to be a quiet night as well. Diana was obviously disappointed that there were no bodies in the freezer for her to look at, but aside from that letdown, she seemed to enjoy herself. Once in Natalie's office, she made a beeline for the computer. "Can I play with your computer, Dr. Nat? I love my computer classes at school, but we don't have one at home, so I don't get to practice very often."

Natalie, distracted by the laboratory results, which had indeed come in, and which seemed to make absolutely no sense at all, nodded permission, adding the appropriate cautions about not messing with programs she didn't recognize. She did hear Diana promise that she'd be careful, but since she was engrossed in the data she was reading, she didn't see the child searching through files with a speed no human could have matched; didn't see the look of concentration on her face that belied her apparent years.

Divia, for her part, was growing more frustrated with every passing second. That fool Larry Merlin had been so certain that Nicholas' mortal doctor friend would keep her files on the computer, and his lessons in how to get past security to access files on the type of server used by the Coroner's Office had been dull, to say the least. Worst of all, it was beginning to appear that what she was looking for was not here. Perhaps it had been foolish to think that the human would have her files stored at work. It might be a good sign, actually. The lack of files on her office computer could mean that she was aware of the potential for danger in what she was trying to do for Nicholas, and that she was doing everything she could to keep his secret. Of course, as her father would no doubt point out, it could also mean that Natalie was just a sloppy researcher who kept her notes in her head or on hardcopy sheets that would turn out to be scattered everywhere.

Grace, the delicious-looking lady Natalie had introduced her to when they arrived, came in just then, and Divia hurriedly replaced the file listings on the screen with a game of computer poker. She was losing at it when Grace looked over her shoulder. "Why, honey, you'd never make it as a card shark if you can't even beat a poor computer! You'd better pay attention in school and come up with a real career."

Divia smiled up at the technician, almost tempted to tell her about the lifetime she had spent as a gambler. Of course, she hadn't used cards back then, not exactly. And no human had ever lost to her more than once. "Oh, don't worry, Miss Grace. I do study hard, very hard. I want to be a doctor someday. I was very sick when I was younger, and a healer saved my life. I want to be able to do that, too." She saw out of the corner of her eye that Natalie's head had come up sharply at that, so apparently it was the right bait after all. Excellent.

Well, have you found the details of her "cure?

Not yet, but then I've only been able to search her computer at work.

You won't find anything; you know. There's nothing to find It didn't work.

It came remarkably close. She's a doctor, a scientist. If there is a biological agent which makes us what we are, there may also be a biological agent which can reverse the condition.

Don't tell me you want to go back now, too!

Of course not. I've always been quite satisfied with my choice. I've never looked back, never felt any regret. I am your daughter, after all.

Divia allowed the entire human holiday season to pass while she slowly insinuated herself further into Natalie's life. This time spent stalking the coroner proved to be quite illuminating for Divia. The woman was certainly dedicated to her work; in fact, she seemed not to have much of a life otherwise. What she did have though, were drive, ambition, a strong sense of duty, a sense of humor remarkably like Divia's own, and the apparently unshakable conviction that she could shape the world to suit her preferences. She would have made an excellent Roman, and Divia found herself liking the human immensely. In fact, Divia reflected one evening as she finished a bottle of Janette's private stock, she liked the doctor so much that she was beginning to rethink her original plan to kill Nat after destroying her files.

"Janette?" Divia barely had to raise her voice; the young woman appeared almost immediately.

"Yes, Divia?" Somehow, Janette managed to appear subservient and haughty at the same time. Divia would never admit it out loud, of course, but she was actually impressed by her father's choice of this one. Usually his choices proved to be so unsuitable. Like Nicholas.

"Sit down, Janette. I want to talk to you."

"I have a club to run."

"Only if you continue to live." Janette sat, but her body language made it clear she wasn't happy about it. Divia waited a moment before she spoke again. "How much do you know about Natalie Lambert?"

"Natalie? Only that she fancies herself in love with Nicolas and is encouraging him in this fantasy that he can be human again. She should be stopped." A shrewd look came into her eye. "Eliminated if possible."

"She did succeed in making him human again."

"No, she didn't. He came back to us."

"Would she ever come across?"

"Natalie? Never! "

"Not even to be with Nick forever?"

Divia's question seemed to catch Janette by surprise. She stared at the elder vampire for several moments, but finally straightened in her chair and said, somewhat defiantly, "No, not even for Nicolas."

Divia released the light hold she had on Janette's mind. The woman was telling the truth, so far as she knew it, but was it the objective truth, or just what Janette wanted to believe? Divia had no way of making sure. Or did she?

What a charming surprise, seeing you again so soon. What can I do for you this evening, my dear?

Do you think Natalie Lambert could be persuaded to come across?

Natalie Lambert? You must be joking. She would die first, so to speak.

She would be a fine addition to our community, and it would help me control Nicholas. Really quite an elegant solution to all our problems.

Nicholas is my creature! I control him!

Really? You could have fooled me.

Be careful, Divia. These little talks of ours are no longer so amusing as they were.

Then prove your point. You claim you control him Lucius. Control him! Or I will destroy him, and all of the rest of you along with him.

Divia landed softly on the pavement outside Natalie's apartment building, offering a silent <Thank you> to the goddess Diana for her safe arrival. She disliked flying within the confines of a city, especially a city with as active a nightlife as Toronto's. There were simply too many opportunities for detection. Of course, she could always just kill anyone who saw her, but that could create as many problems as it solved, and she had always felt that avoiding a mess was better than trying to clean one up. She looked up at the windows of Natalie's apartment and was pleased to see them all dark. She flew up to the living room window and let herself into the apartment. It was quick work to apprehend the cat who jumped at her and lock it in the closet with a promise to let it out and give it a treat when she finished her task.

Divia looked around the living room, but there was no desk or writing table evident anywhere in the room. Since she didn't want to search through the bookcases unless absolutely necessary, she headed straight for the bedroom. There was a desk in there with a computer on it, an Apple this time. Wondering briefly how Natalie managed to keep the operating systems straight, Divia accessed the hard drive directory. There was software for both word processing and database management, but no data files that she could find. Sighing, she started to look for disks and found a pile of them in the top drawer of the desk. Six of the disks were labeled "Nick" and dated. Apparently, Natalie had no fears about them being discovered. Divia started reading through the files chronologically. Most of the files detailed data on failed experiments with nutrition, blood deprivation, and cell studies. Divia was amazed at the amount of information that Natalie had accumulated on vampire physiology. Few vampires, if any, had ever bothered to study their own kind, so what they knew about themselves was anecdotal at best. This information could be of a great deal of use to the community. Divia pocketed the first four disks.

The fifth disk was the one she was looking for. There was extensive information on mutated RNA structures and a drug called lidobutylene that seemed to interact with them. The biochemistry meant nothing to Divia, and the importance of it didn't become apparent until Natalie began to detail the results of her in vivo experiment with the drug, which Divia read with increasing excitement. It was all there: the initial apparent success, the physiological and psychological reactions of the test subject, the growing dependence on the drug, and the need for increasing dosages. Natalie had closed the file with a description of the eventual failure of the experiment.

Divia sat back in her chair, stunned. This was it. The cause of vampirism at least, if not the original source. And the cure. Natalie had found it, and because of LaCroix, she didn't even realize it. Divia turned off the computer and took the last two disks. Nat wouldn't need them any longer.

She went to the window and summoned a field mouse, which she presented with a small flourish to the cat as she let it out of the closet. She paced the room, thinking, while the cat enjoyed its treat. The information that Natalie had accumulated on vampires would be invaluable to the community. Despite a strong desire to drink the blood of such a fine specimen, Divia thought that perhaps, as a reward for her service, Natalie deserved to choose for herself There was no doubt in her mind what Natalie would choose. Mortality for herself and for Nicholas. The first part would be no problem, but the second might prove to be a bit more difficult. Nonsense. There there had to be some advantage to having been the first to go. She was Eldest as well as his master; he must follow her bidding. She saluted the cat, now daintily cleaning itself after its meal, and left by the window.

Natalie wiped the tears from her eyes. "God, Nick, I love that movie. I don't know how many times I've seen it, and it still makes me laugh." She started clearing up the

remains of her movie pig-out session. "This was such a good idea."

Nick stood up from the VCR and grinned at her, tape still in his hand. "Better than the Bela Lugosi festival?"

"You bet." Natalie looked up at him and saw his face change, go absolutely still. "Nick?"

He ignored her completely, and turned to look at a point above and behind her. "LaCroix."

There was the sound of a slight whoosh, and then from immediately behind her, Natalie heard the deep voice so familiar to her from the radio. "Very good, Nicholas, but not quite complete." She spun around and looked into the face she had seen so many times in her nightmares. It was quite a shock to discover that he looked so...ordinary. Mundane. Maybe even a little world-weary. Nothing like the satanic visage she had imagined. And not nearly old enough.

"Really, Nicolas, your hospitality is lacking in even the basics." It was not until she spoke that Nat noticed Janette standing at LaCroix's side. "If you are so intent on making him human, Natalie, you should at least try to teach him some manners."

"What do you two want?" Nick had moved, putting himself into position between the other vampires and Natalie. She wondered if he even realized it.

LaCroix obviously did. "Really, Nicholas, we pose no danger to the good doctor." He smiled threateningly. "You know how much I look forward to one day welcoming her into the family. We have simply come here this evening to speak with you about a matter of some urgency. All of our lives may be at risk."

"What are you talking about, LaCroix?" Nick's tone was openly belligerent; it was clear to Natalie that he was not going to give the others any quarter. As much as that pleased her, something in the attitude of the two vampires made her wonder if perhaps they should listen to them.

"The Eldest is in Toronto. She's asking about your most recent abortive attempt to become mortal again. She is not pleased."

"I'm supposed to care about that?"

"You must care! The entire Toronto community is endangered by this insane search for a cure. This most recent escapade of yours, with this drug Natalie has developed, has captured the attention of the Eldest. She wants this search to end. Now. And nothing more will be said of it." He smiled again, and Nat felt as though her blood was freezing in her veins. "You apparently have a choice as to what you will do with the good doctor. You may wipe her mind so that she has no memory of our existence, you may kill her, or you may bring her across. If you do not do as the Eldest instructs, this family, and possibly the entire community, will be destroyed. There are no other alternatives."

"There are always alternatives." Natalie was amazed to hear the words pop out of her mouth.

LaCroix didn't even spare her a glance, but kept his eyes locked with Nick's. "Not in this case, Nicholas."

"I don't believe you, LaCroix. I've met the Eldest. I can't believe she'd do what you claim. Even she wouldn't kill every vampire in Toronto just to punish me. She just isn't capable of it."

LaCroix raised his eyes to the ceiling and sighed. "Nicholas, I have known the Eldest since she was a human infant. She is capable of this, and of much more, believe me. You must give this up. I have been very lenient with you on this issue for centuries. Now you must grow up. It is past time."

"No.

LaCroix's rage was obvious even to Natalie, and his voice dropped to almost a whisper. "You may do what you like with your own life and even with that of the doctor, but I will not allow you to risk my existence or Janette's existence in this foolhardy matter. You will stop, and you will stop now."

"I will never stop."

They were utterly still, staring at each other, completely at an impasse. Finally LaCroix broke the silence, speaking barely above a whisper. "I can make you, you know, Nicholas."

I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lucius.

<Diana?> Natalie gasped in surprise at the sound of the child's voice coming from the balcony. But what language was she speaking? It sounded vaguely familiar, but Nat just couldn't place it. And her tone...it almost sounded as though she were giving an order to LaCroix, bizarre as that idea might be. And that look on her face. What was going on here? She glanced over at Janette, hoping to find an answer there, but Janette looked as puzzled as Nat felt.

Natalie's attention snapped back to LaCroix as he responded to Diana in the same language she had used. *He is my son.*

Not in his heart.

I cannot release him. Nat didn't need to understand the language to hear the desperation in LaCroix's voice.

You must. His heart is human, let his body be human also. I have examined her notes. She can do it if you allow her to. I want you to release him.

You want! Since when do your wants dictate my actions? Try to remember who you are, daughter.

I do remember, Lucius. I am the one who made you who you are. I am your master. Release him now or I will do it for you.

Even without knowing what Diana had said, Natalie knew from the look on LaCroix's face that something significant had changed. He looked as if someone had struck him. She glanced at Nick, who was gaping openly at the child, and then glanced again toward Janette, who merely shrugged at her. It seemed to Nat as though the three of them were spectators at a play they couldn't quite understand.

LaCroix was still staring at the child, looking as if she was some kind of a monster. After a minute, he shook his head slightly and seemed to draw himself up to his full height. He fmally spoke again, this time in English. "Very well, Divia. As you wish." He walked over to Nick and stared into the younger man's face for a long minute, seeming to look for something. Whatever it was that he sought, he apparently didn't find it, for he closed his eyes and let out a long, sighing breath. When he opened them

again, he turned to Natalie. "Try your drug again, Doctor. It will work now. I have released my Nicholas to you. But be sure you take good care of him. I will be watching."

For the first time in her life, Nat was genuinely speechless. "Huh?"

"You heard me quite well enough, Natalie. Do not ask me to repeat myself."

"Are you telling me that the reason the lidobutylene didn't work was that ..."

Diana--what had LaCroix called her? Divia?--was suddenly standing in front of Nat answering the unfinished question. "Because he was blocking it, Dr. Nat. His life force, through his link with Nick, provided the vampire RNA with the energy to mutate, making it resistant to your drug."

"Who are you?"

The child--<Some child, Natalie!>--smiled up at her. "My original name was Divia, Dr. Nat. I was born in the city of Pompeii in the thirteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Nero, the year you now number 67 AD. I was the only daughter of Seline, mistress of the House of the Rose, and one of her best customers, a general named Lucius Marcus Germanicus."

Lucius. That was the name she had called LaCroix. And he said he'd known her since she was an infant. "Oh my God, you're his. . ."

"I am the one who brought him across. I am his master; he is bound to obey me."

Natalie was still trying to convince herself that this was really, finally real. "Then you're the one he called the Eldest? And that language you were speaking . . ."

"Latin, Nat," Nick broke in. "They were speaking in Latin. It took me a few moments, but I did finally recognize it." He smiled, then laughed at her inquiring look. "I learned it as a boy. All educated men did." He turned to the child. "Is it true? Can I really go back?"

"It has never been done before, but yes, you can be human again. Your Dr. Nat has found the way. It is certainly not what I would ever wish for myself, but I wish you much happiness in it. And Nicholas, don't worry about possible repercussions within the community. If it becomes necessary to do so, I will deal with the Enforcers."

"Can you? Even you?"

"Oh, yes. Age has certain advantages, you know. You will both be required to pledge your silence, and your activities will be closely monitored, at least for a time, but you are now under my protection; you won't be killed. The community sent me here to deal with this situation, and I have dealt with it as I saw fit. They will accept my decision. As I said, don't worry about it."

Natalie turned to say something to Janette, to see her reaction, but she and her master were both gone, forgotten in the human joy of the moment. Natalie mentally shrugged and turned back to Nick. "Well, what are we waiting for? It'll take me a day or two to prepare a new batch of the lidobutylene. But as soon as it's ready, we can get started."

What are you doing here?

I came to see if there was anything I could do for you.

Haven't you done enough for one evening?

I did what was necessary to resolve the situation. Do you really hate me so much?

I don't hate you at all. I love you; I always have.

You have an interesting way of showing it.

I gave you eternal life.

And took my only son as payment!

I didn't come here to argue with you. I just came ...

Yes, yes, I know. Leave now. I never want to see you again.

As you wish. Goodbye, Father.

It was so much easier this time. While Nick did experience some nausea from the drug, it was nothing like the violent reaction he had the first time they used it. The more pessimistic side of Nat's personality expected that something would go wrong, and she was braced for it, but the worst never happened. The single injection was all that was needed. Nick's final transformation back to human was so simple, it was almost anticlimactic. Divia had insisted on being present for the treatment, presumably to protect them if the Enforcers arrived, but they were not disturbed. She knew even before Nick did that the transformation had succeeded.

Unlike the manic response he exhibited the first time, Nick was remarkably calm and quite willing to obey Natalie's instructions. He allowed her to do the myriad tests she wanted and only went outside in the sun for brief periods to acclimate himself to it again. "After all," she said, laughing at him affectionately, "It has been almost 800 years since you were exposed. And we have a lot less ozone to protect us nowadays!" After about three weeks, however, she seemed satisfied that he wouldn't fry if he switched to days and started living like a normal human again, although she did keep showing up at his loft with bottles of SPF 45 sunscreen.

It took Nick somewhat longer to convince Janette to see him again. His first two attempts to see her at the Raven were brought to an abrupt halt by an incensed Miklos who made it painfully clear that Janette wished never to see Monsieur de Brabant again in her long life. Since the second time the message was delivered it was by a Miklos with glowing eyes and distended fangs, Nick decided to employ the better part of valor. The problem, of course, was that he no longer had the option of waiting a century or so while her temper cooled.

Ironically, it was Aristotle who gave him the way back into Janette's good graces. The two were working out a plan for an extremely wealthy Frenchman to die and leave both his considerable personal fortune and control of the DeBrabant Foundation to his long-lost Canadian cousin, Toronto Police Detective Nicholas Knight. While he was waiting for a phone link to the computer in one of Nick's Swiss banks, Aristotle was prattling on about an aging vampire in Turkey who had suddenly decided he was going to go back to speaking only his milk tongue. Since it was a language long out of use, the decision was causing innumerable problems for all concerned, and it was rumored that the Enforcers were beginning to take an interest. Nick was only half listening; the phrase "milk tongue," commonly used by vampires to refer to the culture of one's mortal life

as well as to language, had stimulated a memory and an idea was beginning to form.

Two evenings later, just after dusk, a uniformed messenger delivered a richly decorated scroll to Mme. DuCharme at the Raven. Her curiosity piqued, Janette deigned to open and read it even before the club closed. The message, written in mediaeval french, was in the style that had been popular with practitioners of courtly love several hundred years earlier. It promised the noble and beautiful Lady Janette the eternal love, devotion, and protection of the lowly knight who was not worthy to touch the hem of her gown. He asked only to be able to gaze on her from a distance occasionally. The scroll and the message were a reminder of days gone by, a time for which Janette was often lonely. But Janette was no fool. It was perfectly clear to her as she reread the scroll that it was an attempt by Nicolas to circumvent her temper and be accepted back into her good graces. It was equally clear that it had worked.

LaCroix was not having a good day. Nicholas and that awful Schanke, both of whom had now transferred to the day shift, were investigating the perfectly ordinary disposal of a minor mob functionary, and had come down to the waterfront to investigate a piece of evidence that LaCroix was fairly certain would lead them nowhere. Professional criminals simply did not leave obvious clues at crime scenes for homicide detectives to follow. Concerned that this so-called "lead" could turn out to be a trap, he had followed them. The need to stay out of the sunlight forced him to take a far more circuitous route than the humans had done, however, and some of the parts of the city that he had been forced to traverse had been unpleasant, even for him. He felt unclean.

He watched from a shadowed alcove in the wall of the building across the street as the two humans approached the side door of the warehouse from opposite directions with their weapons drawn. Closing his eyes, he shut out the sight of his surroundings and concentrated on the sound of human heartbeats. <There, there...yes>. There were four heartbeats, two of which were coming from inside the building. Nicholas and Detective Schanke were not outnumbered; they would be able to handle the situation. LaCroix relaxed a bit and began to contemplate the long unpleasant journey back to his house.

Just then, an auto came speeding down the street, brakes squealing as it came to a halt by the warehouse. The two detectives dove for protection as an occupant of the car opened fire on them with what sounded like a semi-automatic weapon. In the midst of the ensuing gun battle, only LaCroix saw the door of the warehouse open and the man stumble out. LaCroix could smell the cocaine in his system even from this distance.

The addict seemed to think that the police were after him because, as LaCroix watched in horror, he grabbed an oblivious Nicholas from behind and held a very nasty-looking knife to his neck as he started babbling something about the coming Armageddon. Nick struggled to break free from the iron grip, but he was held fast.

LaCroix had never felt so helpless. If Nick's assailant would only look across the street, he might be able to hypnotize him into dropping his weapon.

But there was no time. For some reason no one else would ever know, he suddenly jerked Nick's head back, exposing his neck, and sliced it open with the knife. Then flipping the bloody knife around in his hand, he stabbed it into his own abdomen and yanked sharply upward. He was dead as he hit the pavement.

Nick lay only a few feet away. He was losing a great deal of blood--LaCroix could smell the familiar, intoxicating scent--but he was still alive. His heart was still beating. LaCroix blocked out all other sound, concentrating on the sound of that heartbeat, willing it to remain steady, become strong. For a few moments it seemed to do just that. And then the universe changed.

He clearly heard the precious heartbeat skip a beat, go staccato, falter once, then twice. And finally, just as clearly, he heard it stop.

"Nicholas! No!" For the first time in nearly two millennia, LaCroix cursed his decision to live at any cost, cursed the gods who had made eternal darkness the price of eternal life, and cursed the ancient 'healer' who had started the chain of events that would begin by saving one child for him but apparently end by losing him another. He leaned against the wall racked with a mental agony he thought would rend him in two. Losing Fleur had been nothing compared to this. If only he could get to Nicholas, get the boy to drink some of his father's blood before the last breath of life left him, he could be brought back across to safety, to the warm haven of LaCroix's eternal protection.

With that one thought in mind, he stepped out into the undiluted strength of the July noon sun. He managed only two steps toward Nicholas before he sank to the ground in the most profound physical pain he had ever felt. Like a wounded animal, he turned and blindly groped his way back into the protecting alcove and huddled there, stunned. LaCroix turned back to look at Nicholas, only twenty feet from him, but clearly far beyond his reach. From his vantage point, he could see the blood--<so much of it!>--still pouring from the gash in Nicholas' neck, staining the pavement a deep red. As he watched the pool of blood grow, he felt the last of Nicholas' essence drift away. Then that fool Schanke was there, screaming for Nick to hang on and blocking LaCroix's view of his dead child. Despite a sudden desire to rip out Schanke's throat in order to silence him, LaCroix sank back further into the shadows to wait for the humans to come tend to what remained of his son.

He was still crouched there, not having moved a muscle, over eight hours later when the sun finally slipped below the horizon. The human police and doctors had long since come and gone, taking Nicholas' lifeless body with them after they had thoroughly inspected the scene. A part of his mind noted how little the way humans dealt with death had changed over the centuries. They still feared it, even when they were supposedly trained to deal with it.

At any other time watching Natalie Lambert's hysterics and Schanke's feeble attempt to comfort her would have amused him immensely, and he would have used the story to entertain Janette, but for some reason today he seemed to

have lost his sense of humor. Perhaps he should get up, leave this place. But where should he go? What did it matter? No matter where LaCroix went, no matter who he saw or what he did, Nicholas would still be dead.

It was nearly midnight when Janette found him there, still huddled in the doorway, and the sight of him stirred feelings in her that she had thought long dead. Love and pity warred for ascendancy within her, for the first time untouched by the fear of him that had always colored their relationship. She caught a faint whiff of dead blood, and looking around, spotted the stain on the pavement only a few feet away. It wasn't difficult to deduce what had happened. Obviously, LaCroix had been following Nicolas again and had witnessed the horrors that Detective Schanke had described to her in his drunken ramblings earlier in the evening. She touched the side of her master's face.

"Ah, mon cher. Je sais. Je sais."

He started at the sound of her voice, as if he hadn't even been aware of her presence before she spoke. He turned to look up at her, recognition coming only slowly. "Janette?"

"Yes, my dear. You've had a terrible shock. I've come to take you home."

LaCroix's eyes slowly traveled the length of her body, and his face lit slowly with an expression she had never seen him wear before, one that she could only describe as seductive. <Seductive? LaCroix?> Janette shook her head. The shock of Nicolas' true death must have affected her more than she realized. Her surprise was even greater a moment later, however, when he pulled her to him and kissed her, thoroughly and with great expertise.

"My beloved Janette. Always coming to my rescue. It has been far too long since I have properly expressed my gratitude to you."

Janette pulled out of his embrace, shocked to the core and unable to think of a single thing to say. What was he talking about? In all their years together, she could not recall an instance before this night when she had done anything that could be considered the rescue of LaCroix. But her confusion was forgotten immediately. His next words chilled her in a way she hadn't felt since he had brought her across so very long ago.

His hand drifted along her shoulder and down her arm, and he smiled at her again. "Is there no way your Nicolas can prove how grateful he is?"

Astonished, she stared at him, but collected herself enough to push him away as he tried to pull her to him again. "Not here. It's too open, and day will come sooner than we think. We should go back to the Raven. It will be more private there." *And it will give me time to figure out what to do!*

When they reached the Raven, she installed him in her apartments beneath the club with the promise that she was going to get them some sustenance, and would return soon. Muttering every curse she had ever heard in nearly a thousand years, she put through a call to Nicolas' apartment, hoping that the person she needed would be there.

The machine picked up on the second ring. "Yeah, Nick Knight here. I'm either asleep or incommunicado. Leave your message at the beep."

The sound of his recorded voice cut through her like a beam of sunlight and she had to fight to keep her voice even. "Natalie, this is Janette. Pick up the phone if you are there."

She let the silence on the other end extend a bit longer than normal. Nothing. "Well, call me if you get in. It's an emergency."

Unwilling to wait, she found Natalie's number and punched it in. Again the machine picked up and no one responded to her entreaties. That was when she remembered Schanke's description of Natalie's hysterical behavior at the murder scene. The doctor was probably drugged and unable to hear the telephone. Obviously, she was going to have to go to Natalie's apartment to rouse her in person. Checking the time, Janette sighed heavily. There were still several hours until sunrise, but she still hated to leave her home after midnight. LaCroix had always taken care of that type of excursion.

It occurred to Janette suddenly just how much she had always depended on LaCroix. Despite her protestations of independence, he had always been there to take care of unpleasant or boring details, to make her life amusing and pleasant, to take care of her. What would she do if she had to live the rest of eternity without him, without his strength and wisdom? <No. I refuse to lose them both!>

Natalie woke to the sound of someone pounding on her door. Stumbling slightly from the lingering effects of the sedation, she struggled into a robe as she walked through the living room to answer the summons. Her shock was complete when she opened the door to reveal an extremely disheveled Janette, who swept past her into the room.

"What took you so long, Doctor? I have been knocking for ten minutes!"

"You can spare them. It's not as if you only had a few decades to live." It was surprising to Natalie how satisfying she found the look of shock on Janette's face. The satisfaction vanished quickly, however, at Janette's reply.

"I will forgive your rudeness since you are obviously battling the effects of a drug-induced stupor. I assume you were sedated?"

"How did you know that?"

Janette smiled tightly. "I can smell the drug on you, Doctor." Her smile vanished. "But I did have a reason for coming here. What do you know about mental illness?"

"Mental illness?" Natalie repeated, momentarily uncertain how to respond. "It was part of our studies in medical school, of course, but because I chose another speciality my knowledge is pretty basic. Better than the general public, but nowhere near the level of a psychiatrist. Why?"

Much to Natalie's amazement, Janette began to pace the length of the room. "A friend of mine seems to have been stricken with some sort of delusion. He thinks he's someone else."

"Why come to me? Why not go to a specialist?"

"That could be difficult."

Something in her tone of voice struck a chord in Natalie. "Your friend is a vampire." It was not a question.

"Correct, Doctor."

"I know something about your bodies, nothing about your minds." Janette simply kept pacing. "Well, there must be vampires who have been psychiatrists at some point." Janette nodded in agreement. "Can't your friend go to one of them?"

"No.

"Why not, for heaven's sake?"

Janette looked at Natalie with steel in her gaze. "It would not be appropriate for another vampire ever to witness any flaw in him."

An awful suspicion began to grow in Natalie. "Who is it?"

Janette paused in her pacing and seemed to consider how to answer. "LaCroix."

Natalie noted with some detachment that she did not even try to slap Janette, despite her desire to do so. < The sedative must still be affecting me.> "You must be joking. You actually came here to ask me to treat LaCroix? Get out."

"You must help. You are the only human physician I know."

"Leave. Now. There's nothing that could make me even consider trying to help him. Why should I after all he's done?"

"All he's done, Doctor? All he did was what Nicolas had begged him to do for centuries, allow him to become mortal again. And he did release Nicolas to your care, if you remember."

"So he could die!"

"Mortals die, Natalie. That's why they're called mortals. And you're a fool if you think Nicolas' death did not hurt LaCroix."

"Oh, really? How?"

"I told you, he's delusional."

"Why do you think Nick's death has something to do with that?"

"LaCroix was present when it happened, he witnessed it. And you know just how much he loved Nicolas . . ."

"Yeah, right."

"Grow up, Natalie. Nicolas was his only son, chosen after centuries of searching. LaCroix worshiped him. He would have done anything, sacrificed anything, even me, to keep him safe. Had been doing so for almost eight hundred years. That never changed, despite Nicolas' treatment of him. Not even after Nicolas regained his mortality. Watching his son die after all these centuries was too much for LaCroix to take. He--how do you put it?--he snapped. And now he thinks he's Nicolas."

"He thinks...Oh, my God. Where is he? What have you done with him?"

"He's at the Raven."

"I'll get dressed."

Twenty minutes later, Janette was letting them into her apartment beneath the nightclub. Instructing Natalie to remain where she was, Janette disappeared into another room. Natalie looked around the living room, her interest piqued by the understated contemporary elegance of it. There was none of the mix of objects from different times and cultures that Nick had chosen to surround himself with. This room spoke of an exquisite taste. Having heard the story of Janette's mortal life from Nick, Natalie wondered how many centuries and how much money it had taken for the vampire to acquire that taste.

Janette was back before Natalie had time to speculate any further on the evolution of a vampire. Something in the look on her face sent a chill down Nat's spine. "What's wrong, Janette?"

"He's gone."

Hello, Nicholas. It is good to see you again so soon.

Hello, Divia. I thought you had left Toronto. What are you doing back here?

Well, actually, I've come back to ask you for a favor. I'd like you to travel with me for a while, to keep me company. Would you be willing to do that?

But my life here ...

Is finished LaCroix has finally destroyed it. You do realize that, don't you? And I would love to have someone to take care of me, someone I could take care of I've been so alone for so long. Please be that someone. For a while anyway?

Well, I don't know ...

Please, Nicholas? I know we'd enjoy traveling together. And we'd both be less alone.

All right, Divia. I'll come with you. You know, I never could resist a pretty girl.

Interlude with Some Vampires

by Cousin Jules (aka KnightGal aka Julie Stafford)

Natalie descended the staircase and was about to turn towards the kitchen when the sound of rustling paper caught her attention. She entered the drawing room to find LaCroix on the floor, rummaging through a large trunk. At least, she *thought* it was LaCroix. She could only see the very top of his head as small wads of paper came flying above him left and right. Nat was sure there eventually would be some kind of order after the chaos, but what exactly the goal was, she couldn't be sure. She walked over to the trunk, hands on hips, and looked over the raised lid.

"*What* is all this?" she asked.

"What do you think it is?" LaCroix queried in reply.

On the mantelpiece of the large marble fireplace were the beginnings of some kind of holly and ivy decoration. Assorted candles were placed about the room. Wrapping paper of various kinds was piled up in one corner of the large settee.

"It looks like you're getting ready for Christmas," she said innocently.

"*Please*," LaCroix said, looking as though he'd just tasted an inferior vintage.

"Well," she began as she pointed to the various decorations, "I see holly, ivy, candles, wrapping paper, and who knows what else you've got in that trunk, and" she continued as she picked up the desk calendar and turned it in his direction, "it *is* December."

"Correct on all counts," he told her as he rose from the mess. "Still, you're wrong."

"*I'm* wrong, huh?"

"Very much, *ma petite*. What you see are some of the last, true vestiges of a good old Roman Saturnalia."

"You had wrapping paper?" Natalie asked, incredulous.

LaCroix pretended to be offended. "Perhaps *not* wrapping paper, but the Roman Empire was not exactly Outer Mongolia, either."

"My *apologies*," Nat replied with mock seriousness, trying not to break into hysterics. "History never was my strong point."

"That much is obvious."

It was Nat's turn to look offended. (Of course, she really *was* offended, but this is supposed to be a funny story, so let's move on, shall we?)

Natalie punched him in the arm. It didn't hurt. Not much.

"*If* you had studied ancient history," LaCroix began to pontificate as he walked about the room, "you'd realise that nearly everything you associate with Christmas pre-dated that charming celebration by *centuries*. Constantine has *much* to answer for," he stated with no small amount of disdain.

"OK, so, did you have Santa Claus?"

"No. Instead, we had a rather generously-sized Saturn-- the god, not the car-- who presided over the season. It was a great orgiast of eating, drinking and various kinds of naughtiness."

"Oh," she said, trying not to sound put off. "Did you exchange gifts?"

"Oh, yes. And the children often received small wax dolls."

"Awww!" Nat exclaimed. "How cute!"

"Cute, yes, well," he said.

"*Now* what???" she asked in exasperation.

"My contemporaries thought this probably a vestige of human child sacrifice, something done to aid the sowing of crops."

"Ewwwww!" Nat said, thoroughly disgusted.

"Precisely," LaCroix continued. "So much for 'cute'."

"What kind of gifts did the adults get?"

"Oh, we exchanged gold and silver items quite frequently, though we would also exchange branches from holy trees in so-called 'sacred' groves. We would decorate the house with them."

"Uh huh," Natalie responded. "Sooooo..."

"Yesssss?" he asked in an increasingly playful tone of voice.

Nat walked over to the fireplace to finger the holly and ivy.

"Do I want to know what *this* symbolised, if anything?" she asked, silently hoping she could at least look at the greenery in future and not think of a bunch of old Romans at a wild party.

Without warning, LaCroix was suddenly behind her, wrapping his arms about her waist and putting his lips close to her ear.

"It symbolised male and female." He said this in such a devilishly sensual tone that her knees nearly slid out from under her. All of a sudden, she didn't mind the history lesson.

"Oh," she said in a tiny voice. Well, what passed for a voice. Her throat, not so strangely, had become quite tight. She walked over to the doorway to get her bearings. "I think I'll just..."

In another second, he was at her side again.

"Ah, not so fast," he told her, pointing up to show her the mistletoe.

Nat looked at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"*Another* ancient Roman custom?"

"Alas, no," LaCroix answered. "Actually, it's a very quaint Druid custom, though Julius Caesar *did* import it, and..."

The lecture was cut short by a passionate kiss from Natalie.

"Thank goodness for the import/export business," she said, then went back to kissing him again, pleased that *she* had thrown him off guard this time. He drew back from her, then took her hand and led her over the settee, pulling her down almost on top of him and just missing all the wrapping paper. Nat rolled her eyes as the next lesson began.

"Have I ever told you about the origins of New Year's festivals? No? It's really quite fascinating. It goes back to an ancient Roman..."

Choice and Consequence

by Jamie Melody Randell

"You," barked the Captain. "In here. Now."

The elegant figure in the midst of the squad room raised one eyebrow, in the sort of haughty, disdainful look she'd seen on her daughter's Persian cat, 'you are not speaking to *me*, are you?'

"*Now*," repeated Captain Cohen forcefully; and though for a moment it seemed as if he might not obey, the man glided into her office.

"You are?" she demanded, before he could speak.

"I beg your pardon." And she did not like the amusement lurking on his face, oh no, not one bit.

"Your name," she said sharply, in a tone of command.

He shrugged fractionally, as if deciding to humor her. "Lucien LaCroix," he responded, in that dignified accent of his.

Of course it was a French name. Lyrical and pretentious: the sort of name that would be just his style. "Mister LaCroix," she said, purposefully coming down hard on the name, mispronouncing it deliberately so as to roughen the edges of the so-smooth syllables, an ever-so-subtle insult, "you will leave my squad room, and you will not return."

"My dear Captain Cohen," he began, and light blue eyes caught hers, held her gaze with peculiar intensity, "I have business here."

A smile played around her lips, and a rather unladylike sound of contempt escaped her controlled facade. "You have no business here," Cohen said curtly, "and I am tired of seeing your face.".

His lips curled into a faint snarl, his expression turning malevolent -- "Dismissed!" she snapped, and the very sound of her voice seemed to bring a touch of steel to his posture...

"As you wish," he said finally, his voice containing the subtlest hint of a threat; and he stood, and left.

She watched him go, and only when the sound of his steps had faded into the distance did she allow herself to register her relief.

"Your friend," she said later, darkly. "The one called LaCroix."

The woman behind the bar brought her another drink – a signal honor, to be served by the Lady herself; or so the others at the bar seemed to think, judging from their reactions. "He is not my friend," the Lady pronounced, "and I have no control over his actions."

"Friend or not, you know him well," Cohen pressed the Lady -- another one with a pretentious and elegant French name; this crowd was lousy with them. "I have told him that he is unwelcome in my territory."

Janette shrugged, a feline movement. "And you expect me to do... what?" she asked, her voice suggesting most politely that the other woman was completely out of her mind.

Cohen remained unperturbed. "If asked," she stated, "I expect you to tell him that my orders are best followed."

Again, that infinitesimal shrug. "As you wish. However, it will make no difference."

Inexplicably, Amanda Cohen laughed. "Of course it won't," she said, not to Janette but to the air around her, and kept right on laughing.

She stopped home briefly, to see her daughter; to listen to the condensed version of What Happened At School Today, to tuck the covers tenderly around that beaming-sunshine face, to kiss the baby-soft skin of her cheek. Paused on the threshold for a momentary embrace-and-nuzzle with her husband, and tried not to see the everpresent concern on his face: less, now, than when she'd been a beat cop, but still there. That fear which lived in the heart of every husband and wife and child and parent of every police officer on the earth -- that the precious loved one would leave for work one day and never come home.

She wished she had some reassurance to give him, but she had none.

Driving back to the station, his last softly-whispered 'be careful' echoing in her ears, she listened to the two-way radio as Schanke relayed a brief report from the scene of a crime, requesting backup. Absently, she wondered where Knight was, while his partner was out by the car, out by the radio, out of harm's way. A good cop, Knight, if a bit of a maverick; she had to watch out for that, keep him on a tight leash, because mavericks allowed to run unreined had a tendency to get people killed.

Alone in her car, she allowed a tight little smile to cross her face.

She'd thought that her days of danger were over when she'd started riding a desk instead of a patrol motorcycle. Now, somehow, she'd stumbled into a situation more dangerous than any she'd encountered before on the street. Not the strangest situation she'd ever been a part of, but the one with the most imminent peril.

"And I thought New York was bad," she muttered under her breath.

Her years as a New York City cop had taught her a number of interesting things. How a small, slight woman might disarm and render immobile a hulking thug. The myriad crevices where a drug runner might stash contraband. What hidden tunnels and thoroughfares might be of service to the city's homeless and disenfranchised. Which creatures really *did* live in the city's sewers, and which preferred lofty rooftops...

"All I wanted was a little peace and quiet," she sighed.

But life had not had that particular fate in mind for Amanda Cohen, she supposed. All part of the choice she'd made, when she'd left her home and family behind in favor of her new life: the man she'd come to love, against all odds, and the daughter that their love had brought them. They were her greatest treasure: she had sacrificed her world for them, and would do so again without a moment's thought.

That was why she'd brought them to Toronto: to leave behind New York City's dangers in favor of a quiet life, a peaceful life, lived like everyone else. And now, that plan had been shredded...

"So I leave behind New York City, and what do I get?" she wondered; then answered her own question, "Vampires," in a disgusted tone.

Not that she was afraid, not for herself personally. After all, vampires drank *human* blood...

Amanda Cohen glanced up at the solidly red traffic light, and on a whim, just for the hell of it, she indulged herself: a little nudge, the barest twitching of reality, and the traffic signal changed smoothly, halting cross traffic and allowing her unimpeded progress. A simple matter, for one of her kind; not even the meagerest challenge.

Even now, even after decades spent rigidly restricted to human form, her inner powers were still true -- she was one of Oberon's children, after all; no matter how perfectly she mimicked humankind, she would never be *of* them. That had been the curse laid upon her, when she'd chosen to leave the land of the Fair Folk for the magicless world of humanity: that she would be ever torn, with the humans but not truly one herself, caught betwixt her inner self and the external reality she'd opted for.

But she hadn't found it a curse. No, not at all.

The traces of magic which she still carried had given her a Sight that no human could match. She had Seen what other denizens had failed to notice: the tunnel-dwellers of Manhattan, the un-human creatures who surreptitiously called New York home; and now the vampires of Toronto as well. It mystified her how the humans failed to notice – Knight was a fair actor, but as for the rest of his ilk, they were so stunningly not-mundane that it seemed impossible that anyone could fail to note that blatant fact.

And though she did not fear for herself, she was deeply concerned for her family.

//Time to go,// she thought. A new home, a new town, a new name and life. And perhaps, safety for her kin: away from the dangers of blood-sucking creatures that might drain away her one reason for living. Someday they would be gone, someday coming too quickly for her tastes, but until that time she would ensure their safety.

When that sad day came, that she had nothing left in this world to live for, she would return to her home: the shimmering castles, the air so sharp and bright and clear it would burn mortal eyes, the songs of her fellow faerie-folk echoing through the air... suddenly, a pang of homesickness hit her, so intense that for a moment she couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't do anything but experience the pain.

It passed; and she slapped the impending traffic signal with a burst of magic, so that it remained green as her car sailed through.

Tomorrow was another day; for now, she had work to do. A city to protect. A family to care for, and love. A vampire cop under her jurisdiction who badly needed a keeper. And a veritable ton of paperwork, waiting for her to delegate it to others... and the water cooler; she needed to do something about the water cooler. It had broken, and she had 'fixed' it -- the problem being that, since the 'fix' had been done with magic, the cooler only worked when she was present in the building...

//I'll have to remember to replace it before I go,// she mused, whammying another light green as she passed underneath it, enjoying the crisp Toronto night air streaming through her driver's-side window.

Bedside Manners

by Mel Moser

Nick finally got down to the coroner's office late in his shift. The past several nights had been pretty hectic and he'd had a lot of paperwork to dig through. He was still waiting for the autopsy results from the homicide he and Tracy had checked out two nights ago, so Nick thought he'd use it as an excuse to go down and see Nat--not that he really needed an excuse. Pulling on his coat, he checked out with Tracy, and traveled the familiar way down to the morgue

Entering quietly, he hoped to sneak up on Nat, but was stopped dead in his tracks. The person he was about to startle was not Nat, but a slightly overweight, average height man with balding hair and a bored expression. The man wore a lab coat over his hospital greens as he worked over a body on the cart in front of him. Surprised, Nick knocked against a cart, and it clattered against the wall. The man turned and looked at him over his shoulder.

"Can I help you?" he asked in a bored voice, pausing for a second before returning to his work.

"Um... I'm looking for Natalie-- I mean Dr. Lambert." Nick kicked himself for stumbling over his words.

"Hmmm.." the man looked up at him again curiously, then noticed the gun underneath Nick's coat. "Detective Knight, isn't it?" he asked, removing his gloves. He walked over to the desk and began looking through a stack of papers.

"Yes." Nick found himself instinctively wanting to follow the man closely like he usually did Natalie while she worked, but stopped himself. "I was expecting Dr. Lambert."

"Sorry to disappoint you," the man said, a slightly eager note in his voice. Nick grimaced slightly as he realized the day shift would now probably have something to gossip about. "Dr. Lambert called off sick tonight. Flu, I think. There's a pretty nasty strain of influenza going around. Better be careful you don't come down with it yourself. "

Nick smiled at the irony. "I'll be careful."

"Ah, yes, here they are." He picked up a manila folder and held it out to Nick. "John Doe, Case #41811, drug overdose. She said you might be looking for this."

Nick took the envelope from him. The label was written in Natalie's familiar handwriting. "You talked to her?"

"Yeah. She called in and gave me a quick briefing on everything. Sounded sick as a dog, too." The man didn't seem to notice the concern on Nick's face and went back towards the table to continue his work. "I doubt she'll be back for a couple of days."

Staring at the envelope, it took a second for the words to register. "Um, thanks." He wasn't sure if the man heard him, but at this point, he wasn't even sure he cared. He had to go and check on Natalie.

En route to Natalie's, Nick made a brief call to Tracy to let her know he was following a lead and wouldn't be back the rest of the evening. He tried Natalie's phone number, but just got a busy signal, then tried her cell phone and pager, but still didn't get a response.

Nick began to worry. He tried to remember when he'd last seen Nat. Probably the night before last at the last homicide scene. She had looked exhausted, he recalled.

Parking the caddie next to Natalie's car outside her apartment complex, he saw that her windows were dark. No one answered the doorbell, or his knocks, so he used the key she had given him. "Natalie?" he called out, peering into the darkness of her apartment. Closing the door behind him, he saw a brief movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Nat?" he called again.

A dark streak flashed across the room and pressed against his leg. "Rreeeooow!" Sidney was rubbing insistently against his legs as if to say *Feed me!* Nick didn't need to be a mind-reader to figure out what the cat wanted. "Sidney?"

"Rreeooow?" was the response. Sidney set off at a trot towards the kitchen, pausing only to turn back and see if Nick was following him. Turning on the lights Nick could see the rest of the living area. The rooms were a bit messy. A few used dishes and half-read magazines lay scattered on top of the coffee table by the sofa. The afghans and pillows were scattered about the sofa and armchair. Two of the houseplants by the sliding glass door had been knocked over--Sidney's work, no guesswork there. A pile of opened and unopened mail lay on the dining room table, next to Natalie's purse and medical bag. "Rreeoow!" Sidney came back to wander through his legs again, this time purring loudly.

"OK, Sidney, I'm coming." Nick went into the kitchen and found it wasn't in much better shape than the other rooms. Looking down at Sidney's dishes, he saw that they were both empty. Filling up the water bowl first, Nick placed it on the floor and watched Sidney drink a few good laps, look at his empty food dish, and then look up at him expectantly again. It only took him a minute to find the cat food, a minute longer to find the can opener. Sidney's eyes watched him hungrily the entire time. Sidney pounced on the food before it was even out of the can.

Well, one down, one more to go, Nick thought to himself, and began looking for Natalie. On his way through the living room, he followed the phone cord for across the room until he found the phone scattered on the floor by an end table, the receiver off the hook. Another present from Sidney. He checked to make sure it still worked before returning the phone, receiver in place, to the table.

The door to her bedroom was partially opened, the light from the living room shone from behind him. Clothes lay about the room. He could detect her strong, familiar scent in the air.

Nick was able to make out the bed against the wall. He turned on the lamp beside the bed and noticed that next to her alarm clock was a photograph of them taken a couple of years ago on her birthday, taken while they were dancing. He remembered that night. Natalie wasn't very comfortable dancing , but he had talked her into a few spins around the floor. Much to her own surprise, Nat had been pretty good, and he had enjoyed having her near him. She had looked very beautiful that night, dressed in a colorful dress that crackled as she moved. The picture had caught the both of them smiling and holding each other close. Both of them looked good in it. Lost in the memories of that night, he nearly forgot the reason he was here.

The sound of her familiar heartbeat coming from the vicinity of the center of the bed brought him back. The heartbeat was a little rapid, but it was hers. Now he could see a vague outline underneath the covers. Sitting down on the side of the bed, he peeled the covers back. Sound asleep, she was curled on her right side, one arm hugging a pillow against her chest. At the sight of her bare arm, Nick thought she might have been sleeping in the nude under the blankets, but then he caught sight of green satin fabric between her shoulder and neck. Her face, devoid of makeup, was pale with a damp sheen. Her hair was in disarray. Nick was touched by how peaceful she looked while she slept, her features relaxed, her lips slightly parted as she breathed. It took him a second to remember that she was sick. She had so rarely been sick in the time he had known her that this was a new concept for him.

Alongside the table, he noticed an empty glass and an opened bottle of Tylenol. Laying his hand on hers, he could tell that her body was warm. He moved to touch her forehead, then her cheek with the back of his fingers, cursing his cool body temperature that made it difficult to accurately determine how warm she really was. She moaned slightly, moving a bit at his touch.

"Nat?" he called her name again. She stirred again. He stroked her soft hair until she woke up.

"Nick?" Nat turned slightly to look at him.

"Nat, are you OK?" It was a stupid question, but it was out before he had a chance to stop it.

Too late, he saw the brief flash of anger in her eyes. "No, you big oaf. I am NOT OK. I'm sick." Her face was flushed with her combined anger and fever.

Nick, dumbfounded by her expression, could only respond, "Sick?" Then regretted his choice of words. Of course she was sick. Wasn't that what the guy at the morgue told him?

"Yes, Nick. Sick. You know, one of those millions of afflictions that torture us mere mortals on a regular basis." Feeling her temperature rising again, she sat up and reached out for the bottle of Tylenol and the glass, her bare arms shivering at being exposed to the cool air of the room. Lifting the glass, Nat was dismayed to find it empty.

Nick took the empty glass from her hands and headed towards the bathroom with it. "I know what sick is, Nat." He had seen quite a lot of sickness in his long life. "I'm not *that* out of touch." Echoing in the bathroom, his voice was calm and sincere.

Nat felt slightly embarrassed for snapping at him. She *was* usually crabby when she was sick. She heard the sound of water running, then Nick returned to her bedside and handed her the glass, now full of water. It felt cold and refreshing to her warm hand.

"And I did have that fever last month, remember?"

"Yes, I remember." Nat took the glass of water gratefully from him. Tapping the bottle of Tylenol against her blanket-covered thigh she tried to get two capsules to come out of the bottle, but one tap too many brought a shower of yellow and red caplets all over her lap.. Her hands full, she looked helplessly at the mess. Nick solved her dilemma by reaching down to pick each one up, his hand touching her through the blankets where he grabbed them, taking the bottle from her hand and returning the tablets to it. "Thank you." Her voice was soft and dreamy. It caught his attention and he looked into her eyes.

The moment continued for a long breath, then Nick held out his hand, bearing two red and yellow Tylenol gel capsules. "Tylenol?" he offered.

What? Oh, yeah. The Tylenol. She reached down with her free hand and picked up the caplets from his hand, then popped them in her mouth and chased them down with several long swallows of water She continued to drink the water without breathing until the glass was empty. She looked back at Nick only to find him smiling down at her.

"What's so funny?" Nat couldn't think of anything that could be funny, especially since she knew she must look horrible without any makeup, her hair all messed up, and her skin pale and sickly. And she felt horrible, her head pounded, and on top of the fever, her body was exhausted and ached horribly.

Nick watched her drink the water down thirstily and was reminded of a new-born vampire taking its first taste of blood. He couldn't even imagine Nat's response if he told her that. But she was sick, and he decided now was not the time to get her riled up, so he wiped the grin off his face. "Nothing." He reached down to start pulling the blankets up around her again. "You should lie down and get some rest."

Nat thought for a second that there was a battle brewing here, but her sick and aching body took precedence. The idea of lying back and falling asleep underneath the covers again was too tempting. His soft voice was hypnotic as it told her to lay back. She wondered if he was using more than his soft voice to persuade her back to sleep, but she was growing too comfortable to worry about it. She trusted him; there was nothing to worry about.

"Don't worry." Nick whispered as he tucked the covers up around her. He leaned down and kissed her tenderly on her forehead. "I'll take care of you." His lips were cool against her temple.

Nick? Take care of her? She was always the one taking care of him. Now this was going to be experience, she thought, smiling to herself. Nat drifted off to sleep again.

Flu. Now how long had it been since he took care of someone with the flu? They had probably still been draining the blood out of people to draw out the infection. An intriguing medical practice to vampires, but not quite modern medicine. Nope, he was going to have to use common sense on this one. After checking on Nat and Sidney one last time, he headed out for a while. He returned just over an hour later, his arms full of purchases.

At an overnight drug store, he had discovered not only a book on treating common illnesses, but a helpful middle aged woman more than glad to give a young man advice on taking care of a sick wife. Plenty of fluids, aspirin for the aches and fever, bed rest, and basically let the illness run its course. Like the man in the morgue, she had said a nasty bout of the flu was going around. Wiped people out for days at a time, followed by several weeks of fatigue. Better go home and take good care of her, the woman suggested, adding that everyone liked to be pampered now and then. And that's what he intended to do, Nick told himself as he put away his purchases. Outside, dawn was just beginning to break. Closing the blinds and curtains, he set about tidying up the place. Whether Nat liked it or not, Nick thought to himself, he was here for the day at least.

Checking up on Natalie, he saw that she must have been tossing and turning in her sleep, for the covers had been thrown off and were now lying about her hips. She was shivering. There was a soft meow from a now-content Sidney who lay curled up at the foot of the bed. Giving the cat a couple soft pats as he passed, Nick pulled up the blankets over her again. Nat was still restless, stirring occasionally as she slept, and he thought he heard her call his name. "Nick..."

"Nat?" he replied, thinking she was awake. But when Nick sat down beside her, he saw that she was still asleep. She must be dreaming, he realized. Was she dreaming about him, he wondered? What kind of dreams did she have?

He had known this woman for nearly 6 years now. She was a large part of his life. His best friend, his companion, his doctor, and yet he realized that he still didn't know a lot about her. Most of their time spent together they talked about work, or him, or his dream to become mortal again and all that it implied. They had talked little about her, he now realized regretfully. She always seemed so reluctant to talk about herself. There was always a wall around her feelings, a barrier that kept anyone from getting too close. And with the distance that he had been putting between them, the wall had grown even stronger. If he wasn't afraid of the implications of getting further involved, he would break down those walls of hers and love the sensitive, passionate woman he knew was behind them.

But she was a mortal, and he was a bloodsucking, immortal vampire.

The barriers would always remain between them unless they found a cure. Of course, there was always the quick method to learning more about her, his eyes traveling to find that tempting spot on her neck where her pulse beat strongly. Even now, he could hear her heartbeat echoing in his ears, the sweet smell of her blood coursing through her veins. So easy it would be to lean down and taste just a little. Nick felt his eyes burning and fangs tickling his inner lip. In shock, he violently looked away, shaking his head in self-admonishment, feeling guilty and shameful for such thoughts. At that moment, like many times in the past, he hated what he was. Natalie had been his wish, a wish he had never expected to be granted. He had wanted to find someone to help him, or some way to find a cure, and after years of searching she had come into his life. Not only did she seem the possible answer for finding his cure, but Natalie herself intrigued him. Was it fate, he wondered? Was she the fulfillment of his wish? Was she even more than what he wished for? He knew he was afraid to answer that question. He was a coward for expecting and wanting too much.

Watching Natalie sleeping reminded him how tired he was, how little rest he had been getting the past week or so. Pulling up a nearby armchair, he settled down and drifted off to sleep

.

Natalie awoke hot and feverish. Her whole body still ached, her throat was parched, and there were other bodily functions that required attention. Sitting up and throwing the covers to the side, she froze. She wasn't alone in her bedroom. The room was mostly dark, except where daylight showed through the edge of the curtains by the windows. Not a lot of light, but enough to illuminate the tall figure asleep in the chair by her bed. She knew who it was. Nick or not, she had to get to the bathroom. Foregoing all modesty, she didn't even bother looking for her bathrobe. It was her bedroom, gosh darn it, and she was sick.

Somehow, spurring her aching body on, she grabbed her glass and managed to travel the short distance to her bathroom. Several minutes and a glass of water later, her body felt a little bit better until she looked in the mirror and saw her pale, feverish reflection looking back at her. The white light of the bathroom lights made her look even worse, emphasizing the dark circles building under her eyes, the slight blemishes in her skin, the beginnings of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Oh God, and on top of it all, Nick was here and had to see her like this. Oh well, now he got to see her at her worst. She filled the sink with cool water. Groaning aloud, she washed her face with a cool, wet washcloth, then she regretted it as the cool washcloth only reminded her of the rest of her aching, hot body. She bent over and, leaning heavily against the top of the sink, proceeded to wash her arms as well.

"Nat? Are you OK?" Damn. She must have left the door partially open, as she saw his reflection behind her in the mirror.

"No, I'm NOT o-"

"-OK. I know. Got that the first time." He moved up behind her and took the washcloth from her hands. Rinsing and wringing it out in the sink, he placed it against the smooth, hot skin of her shoulder, then ran it down her arm. And then he repeated himself on the other side of her body. Lifting her heavy damp hair off her the back of her neck, he rinsed out the cloth again and placed it against her neck and the hot skin of her back, letting the water run down around her neck to disappear down the front of her chest.

"Oh, God. That feels so good," Nat sighed, still leaning on the sink. Her knees were starting to grow tired, and at that moment they decided to give out. Before she had a chance to catch herself, Nick's arm reached around her waist to hold her up.

"Where does it hurt?" he asked.

"Hurt? Everywhere. I feel like I got hit by a Mack truck. Or, at least that's the phrase that's generally used."

Nick thought for a second. "I got hit by a Mack truck before. Didn't hurt that much."

She grabbed the washcloth out of the sink and threw it at him. "Oh, stop it. That's not funny." But she found herself smiling at his remark.

Catching the washcloth easily, he wrung it out just at the top of her the back, underneath her hair again. The

water pooled and ran down her back and legs, and around her sides dampening her nightgown, and dripping onto the bathroom tiles in front of her feet. Some of it ran onto his shirt where he held her, but he didn't notice. His attention was caught up in the long shiver that ran through her body.

Nick tossed the washcloth back in the basin. "All right. Enough of this. Back to bed with you." To Nat's surprise, he scooped her up in his arms and easily carried her back to the bed, leaving her wide-eyed and breathless looking up at him as he pulled the blankets up around her damp body.

Words of protest bubbled up, but his finger across her lips silenced her. "Doctor's orders." He left silently only to return a few seconds later carrying a tall glass of orange juice.

"Where did you get that?" She knew her refrigerator was mostly empty and had not contained any orange juice.

"Grocery store." Nick replied, watching to make sure she drank a good amount of it.

"Grocery store?" Nat tried to imagine Nick grocery shopping. It was a comical vision. It must have made him sick, given his low tolerance for typical foodstuffs.

It was Nick's turn to get her back. "You know. Grocery store. Food, shopping carts, coupons, annoying tabloid magazines..."

"I know what a grocery store-- " She caught herself. Damn, that sounded familiar. He was grinning at her again. Man, he was in big trouble once she felt better. Already, she thought of some new ingredients to add to his protein shakes that she knew he'd just love. "Touché." She drank some more juice. "I bet they had to kick you out of the meat section."

"There was a very delicious looking woman working behind the meat counter." He winked and smiled at her. Nat was probably the only one he could joke with like this.

Nat laughed lightly but regretted it when it brought back her headache. She closed her eyes in pain.

"Tylenol?" Opening her eyes, she saw that two more Tylenol had magically appeared in his hand. She washed them down with the remainder of the juice.

"Good girl." He took the empty glass from her hand. "Now back to bed with you." Kissing her brow, he tucked the covers over her as she laid back down.

Natalie was dreaming again. She was in a meadow, dressed in a beautiful white gown. She walked upon the soft earth, walking among flowers and lush green grass. The wind was blowing softly, teasing at her hair and whispering through the leaves of the distant trees. Lifting her eyes, she saw the birds dancing in the summer air against the blue sky. The sun shown warmly from behind cottony white clouds.

Looking in the distance, she saw another person. She knew him. She loved him. Eagerly, she stood still and lifted her eyes and her heart to watch him walking towards her, his gait strong and steady as he returned her smile. He walked on. But behind him, a growing darkness gathered and moved towards him.

"Nick!" she cried out in alarm. But he did not hear her. He did not see the blackness steal up from behind him and overtake him. He staggered and faltered.

"Nick!" she called to him again. "Nick, don't give up. Keep coming. I'm here." She held out her arms, encouraging him on.

He staggered on towards her, but the darkness was churning, luring him back into its evil. A dark mist began to swirl around him and start to hide him from her view, taking him away. "Nick!! Don't go. Don't give up Nick" she cried out. She thought she heard him call her name, but she wasn't sure. "Nick!?"

"Shhhh..." A familiar voice murmured in her ear as cool, gentle arms held and rocked her. "Nat, it's OK." Soft lips kissed her temple. It was Nick, and he was OK. That's all that mattered.

Nat opened her eyes to see that her bedroom was dark now but for the dim light from her bedside lamp. Held snug against his chest, his arms wrapped around her, Nick continued to rock her as he whispered soothing words into her hair. It felt so good having him hold her like that. She was afraid to move, to even breathe, afraid that the moment would end. How long had it been since he had held her like this, she wondered? She tasted a wet saltiness on her lips and felt the dampness of her tears on her cheeks. The coolness of his body was comforting against her burning hot, dry skin.

Nick had heard her cry out in her dream, calling his name and asking him not to go. It was not only her words, but the desperation and despair in her voice that hit him right in the heart. "Don't give up," she had cried as he lifted her into his arms. Now he felt her damp tears against his neck as he stroked her hair. He knew she was awake, but he wanted to hold her like this forever. He kissed her forehead, then each eyelid, kissing away the tears. It was then he noticed the her skin was unbelievably warm to even his touch. A worried look passed across his face. Nat`s body was burning up beneath his cool kisses

One of Nick's arms pulled away from her and she feared that the embrace was drawing to an end. An instant later, a thermometer was popped in her mouth and under her tongue.

Her look of surprise was priceless, and Nick would have enjoyed it more if he hadn't been so preoccupied with watching the numbers on the digital display of the thermometer as they rapidly flashed. He thought the counter would slow as it neared the 100 degree mark, but he watched as the numbers didn't begin to slow until they crossed 102.

Nat tried to read the display, staring at the thermometer cross eyed as she tried to keep it under her tongue. Glancing up at Nick, she saw the look of concern on his face. Blinking her eyes, she found it hard to concentrate and look at him for very long. Her eyes hurt, so she closed them briefly.

Opening her eyes, they both watched as the display finally stopped at 102.8 degrees and blinked several times. Removing it from her mouth, Nick held the thermometer up in the light again, as if hoping the number would read differently

"Nat, I should take you to the hospital."

She could hear the concern in his voice. Wrapping her arms tighter around his neck, she shook her head. She didn't want to go to the hospital. She wanted to stay right her, just like this.

"Nat..." His hand was stroking her hair, while the other stroked her bare arm, soothing her skin with the coldness of his body. "Your temperature is too high."

"...need to lower it..." she mumbled, slightly disoriented against his neck. She was beginning to feel the effects of her prolonged fever.

"You took two Tylenol just an hour ago. That's eight in the past 24 hours, and that's the dosage limit."

Nat shook her head slightly again. "Need a cool bath..." And then she hugged him tightly, "Or a cool body." The longer she sat there cradled in his lap, her body pressed against his, the more she felt the unnatural coldness of his vampire flesh seeping into her.

Nick never would have imagined that the coldness of his body could actually be useful. He considered giving her a cool bath for a second, but the thought of bathing her was enough to stir the bloodlust that was already tingling within him. No, he gave himself a mental shake, he had to get her temperature down.

"Here. " Nick shook her awake from her half-sleep. He pressed a glass of water into her hand. "Drink."

Nat looked at him hesitantly. She really wasn't thirsty--she just wanted to sleep.

Noticing her reluctance, he helped her lift the glass to her lips. "Drink, Natalie. All of it." She was already dehydrated, and he had to get her to replace the lost fluids.

Lifting her head, she obeyed and somehow managed to drink the entire glass. The empty glass disappeared for a moment only, to be replaced by a full one.

"Again," ordered the voice in her ear. Again she emptied the glass. Though she wasn't thirsty, the water did taste good. After the third glass, she felt sure she couldn't drink another swallow. Fortunately, that was the last glass Nick made her drink, and Nat drifted off to sleep.

When she opened her eyes again she felt warm and comfortable. Her body was tired, but as far as she could tell the raging fever was gone. It was daytime. She could feel Nick's body beneath her as she lay against him, her body pressed against the length of his. Glancing up, she could see he was still asleep, his face relaxed. She smiled to herself, noticing how boyishly innocent he looked while he slept. It made her realize how much she loved him. Usually she fell asleep first, and she rarely got to study him this closely. Nat wondered if he had ever watched *her* as she slept like.

"How do you feel?" Nick asked, finally waking. He could at least tell that her temperature had lowered, though he should probably check it again..

"Better, but tired." Nat snuggled up against him again, relishing in the comfort of their closeness.

Nick kissed her forehead. "Good. You really gave me a scare there last night." More than you know, he said to himself. He had stayed awake for hours last night just holding her, listening to her every breath and heartbeat, wondering every few minutes if he should take her to the hospital. Though the book he read said one should seek professional care if the temperature was 103 degrees or higher, Nat's temperature had been too close to that mark for his comfort. Fortunately, after several hours, the fever had broken and Nick had finally drifted off into an uneasy sleep full of disturbing dreams.

Nat felt and at the same time, heard her stomach growl.

"Hungry?" Nick chuckled, his laugh echoing in his chest. Hunger was a good sign.

Nat smiled. "Just a little."

Placing a kiss against her temple, Nick went to find his patient something to eat.

After polishing off some toast and orange juice, Nat fell back asleep. The sun had set over an hour ago, so Nick took the time to slip back to the loft for a shower, a change of clothes and to feed. He returned to find Natalie still sound asleep and the apartment still dark. Entering the living room, he decided to watch the news and turned on a light to look for the TV remote.

"Reow!" Sidney jumped down off the window sill landing on the desk and knocking over a pile of papers and folders in the process. Papers tumbled to the floor as Sidney leapt to the floor and headed off into the bedroom.

"Sidney!" Nick scolded. He went over and began cleaning up the mess the mischievous cat had left behind. Piling up the papers back into a neat stack, the title of the document in his hand caught his attention. It was titled "The Dangers and Pitfalls of Doctor/Patient Relationships." His eyes skimmed down the page and noted several sections where the text had been highlighted with a neon-pink marker. "Patients undergoing treatment for long periods of time under the same physician often develop strong feelings for their doctor, typically exhibited as infatuation or a desire for deeper friendship." The article continued to detail several documented cases where the lines between the patient and doctor had been crossed and the problems that had resulted.

And then, further down, more text was highlighted: "Regardless of the doctor's own personal feelings, the needs of the patient must come first." Nick set the papers down on the desk and stared off into space, deep in thought Did Nat really think he was only infatuated with her? Was it his own behavior or was this the reason why she had been so distant from him lately? Had Nat begun to remember what had happened that night at the Azure when he had told LaCroix that his interest in Natalie was only superficial? What price had they paid for the distance that they had placed between them, and for what had happened that night?

Was it worth it?

Shaking his head, he said down, the TV remote and news forgotten as he pondered the ramifications of what his decisions had cost them.

Should he tell her how he felt, how much he really did love her? If he did, what would happen to their relationship and could they still remain friends? To his chagrin, their friendship had greatly deteriorated over the past several months. Additionally, they were not much closer to finding a cure--both of them knew that. If they didn't find the cure, he would eventually have to move on and most likely leave her behind. Or could he take her with him? What right did he have to do that? No, he had learned the lesson repeatedly in the past that it was best to leave them behind. But this time it was different. He had never been so close to a mortal. Until that Valentine's Day, he had never truly realized the depth of his own feelings for Natalie. And since then, he had been fearful that LaCroix would learn his true feelings and use them against him--but he had never been this close to the cure either. What if Natalie was the one to help him find the cure? How long would it take? Would they find it in time? Would LaCroix let them?

He could bring her across.

The thought had crossed his mind on more than one occasion. He had often wondered what he might do if he was forced with the choice of bringing her across, if

somehow she was injured to the point that the only other option was death. Nick shook his head. He didn't even want to imagine something happening to Natalie that would bring him to have to make that decision. No. Something deep inside him, gut instinct perhaps, told him that it was wrong, that bringing her across would be the wrong choice. Natalie represented everything in mortality that meant good to him: humanity, kindness, intelligence, strength, hope. He couldn't tarnish her goodness with the evil that vampirism would bring. He knew all too well the effect that vampirism had on a soul. It had taken him centuries to recognize and even begin to try to understand it. Even now, each day it still gnawed at him. No, that option was definitely out. He couldn't do that to Nat.

But could he face the alternative of living life without her? He had loved before, sometimes perhaps too much. But this time he felt it was different. Perhaps it was the hope that they could find a cure together, perhaps it was her beautiful smile, or her dry sarcasm and wit, or her way of getting under his skin and reminding him of his quest for humanity. He couldn't say for sure, but with all these things, Natalie was probably the most unique woman he had ever met. For those and many other reasons, he loved her. And because he loved her, he might one day have to make the difficult decision to stay with her or leave. It was a decision he didn't want to make. Especially not yet.

The sound of running water broke him out of his reverie. Nat was awake again and apparently feeling well enough to take a shower. Nick sighed. Soon this private time they had spent together would be over and things would have to return to status quo again. His expression somber, Nick replaced the pile of papers back on the desk and sank heavily into the nearby armchair.

The sound of running water stopped after several minutes. A few minutes later the door to her bedroom opened and Natalie wandered out towel-drying her hair, her pink bathrobe tied tightly at her waist.

Nat paused when she saw him sitting quietly in the armchair. "You're sitting here in the dark?" she asked.

There was a long pause before Nick responded. "Yes." His voice was quiet and despondent. Slowly, he looked up and studied her closely as if noticing her for the first time. "You're looking better."

Nat gave him a wry smile. "A hot shower can work wonders," she remarked, perplexed by his mood. He seemed distracted.

"Reese called." Nick said nonchalantly, looking away from her so he wouldn't have to look into her eyes. "There's a homicide downtown he wants me and Tracy to look into." He had booked off the past couple of nights while taking care of her

"I see." Nat stopped drying her hair. Though she did her best to try to hide it, her disappointment was evident. The intimacy of the past couple days was over, she sadly realized.

Nick stood up. Walking over to her, he cupped her cheek with his hand and tilted her face up to look into his eyes. With his thumb, he gently caressed her chin. "Will you be OK if I go?" he asked quietly, his voice tender with concern.

Nat nodded slightly. "The fever's gone. I should be fine." Closing her eyes, she tried to turn her face away but Nick used his thumb to gently make her look at him again.

Holding her blue eyes with his, Nick let his love for her show in his eyes. He silently implored her to understand, to see how much she meant to him, how beautiful and special she was. Pulling her into his arms, he let himself savor her sweet fresh scent one last time, his cheek against her temple. Kissing her tenderly on the forehead, his lips lingered for a long second as he tasted her damp skin against his lips. "I'll call you later," he promised, and then he turned and walked out the door.

Natalie stood there staring after him long after he was gone.

It was a slow night. Even though Nick had been off for several days, there was not a lot of work to do. There had been very few new homicide cases in the past couple of days. Tonight, Tracy had finished up most of the paperwork and had left early--something about wanting to follow a lead on an old open case. Nick didn't care much. It was no surprise when several hours later he found himself opening the door to the morgue and searching around expectantly for Natalie.

He saw her standing by her desk finishing up some paperwork and stuffing it into a manila envelope. Nick noticed that though she was still pale, she looked much better. Sneaking up quietly behind her, he was able to get right behind her without her even noticing.

"Good evening, Doctor, " he said in her ear with the most evil voice he could muster. "Feeling better?"

Natalie gasped and nearly jumped a foot in the air. "I wish you would stop doing that!" She turned around to begin to scold him and instead nearly collided with him when she realized how close he was standing. She tried to get angry with him, but the boyish, endearing grin on Nick's face went straight to her heart and somehow she found herself smiling back at him. She pushed playfully against his chest.

Nick caught her hand and placed a gentle kiss on the back of it. He grimaced slightly at the smell and taste he discovered there. Oh, the woes of being in love with a coroner. "Formaldehyde. My favorite flavor."

"Serves you right." Nat replied wryly. Her eyes met his and as time stood still for a brief moment, her expression was soft and affectionate. The moment passed and her familiar mask of professionalism replaced it.

Averting her eyes, Nat removed her hand from his distracting touch and pushed past him to return to her work. "I'm much better, thanks." Out of spite, Nat stopped suddenly and felt him run into her as he followed behind.

Surprised, Nick resisted the impulse to jump back away from her. Instead, he grabbed her lightly at the elbows and pulled her back against him. He felt her relax in his arms as his cheek came to rest against hers. They let the embrace linger. Oh, what an interesting game they played, Nick thought to himself. Her painfully familiar heartbeat pounded against his chest and in his ears. Inhaling, he could smell the scent of her shampoo, the warm smell of her skin and the familiar scent of her blood filling his nostrils. An endearing temptation indeed. With a sigh, he placed a soft kiss against her temple and smiled as he whispered in her ear. "I'm glad."

They both pulled away from each other at the same moment, and Nat walked around to the other side of the examining table to prepare for the next autopsy.

"I hope I did the right things in taking care of you." Nick said, watching her closely.

"Plenty of fluids, bed rest." Nat replied as she readied her tools. Smiling, she added, "Um, keeping the temperature down." Nat finished placing her medical instruments on the tray beside her. "I'd say you did pretty good." She glanced up and gave him a warm smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He smiled back at her. As he turned to leave, a thought hit him. "And my bedside manners, Doctor?" he asked teasingly.

"Not bad." Nat was still smiling at him from across the examining table but now there was a distant look in her eyes. "Not bad at all."

Her smile continued as she watched Nick walk out of the room.

A Vow Fulfilled

by Dianne T. DeSha (a.k.a la Mercenaire)

It had been so easy.

Urs was not the most clever creature, and deathly afraid of him when he wanted her to be. She obeyed without question, her eyes wide and lips trembling. Her elaborately-contrived distress from a continent away had sent Vachon racing out of town as though the Devil himself was spurring him on.

And perhaps he was.

Vachon would be gone for weeks; plenty of time to get to know Nicholas' new partner a little better.

Returning from the captain's office, Nick looked up as his partner flopped down on one side of the desk they shared. He watched as she sat there a moment, chair tipped back, body slouched half-sideways, a dreamy smile playing over her face and eyes focused on a wisp of nothing somewhere just shy of the ceiling. Whoever this guy was--and she'd been very secretive about him--he'd been doing quite a number on her for the past week.

"Tracy?" No response. He raised the volume a bit. "Earth to Detective Vetter!"

"Oh!" She started, turned, and blushed, suddenly unable to raise her eyes any higher than the papers she shuffled meaninglessly before her. Realizing how silly she looked, she pulled open a drawer...and started, her eyes going wide.

In an instant Nick was at her side, closing the drawer. "Your desk is on the other side, Space Cadet," he said with a smirk.

"You *know* him?"

"Who?" Nick looked up, confused.

"The Nightcrawler. I saw the photo. 'To Nicholas, Always Regretting.'?"

Nick looked only half as uncomfortable as he felt. "Um, yeah. Well, I've known him for a long time, from before he was 'The Nightcrawler'." *All* he needed now was a star-struck partner! e grabbed for a guaranteed way to change the topic. "So, how are things with your new 'friend' ?"

To his surprise instead of the coy denial he was used to, she blanched and swallowed hard. "It's fine," she answered distractedly, standing up and gathering her things. "I just remembered, I've got...an errand I have to run. I'll be back."

And she was gone. Nick just stared for a moment, then shook his head. From anyone else he'd figure it was a phony--and highly suspicious--excuse. From Tracy...well, she probably *had* just remembered an errand.

It would be so easy.

He would romance her across--bringing her into the dark night not by force, but with her own breathless whispered consent.

And Nicholas, his dear Nicholas. The mortal repercussions of losing another partner--and the Commissioner's daughter at that--would be nothing compared to the snares it would wind about his soul.

The doubts, the self-recriminations--he could hear them now. As always, Nicholas would take the loss of another mortal life as yet another nail in the cross he bore so proudly on his back.

Nicholas would be angry, furious, for a time. That was hardly news. But all too soon his well-trained doubts and fears would begin to kick in--Was he not truly a deadly bane in the life of any mortal he befriended? Might not his precious Dr. Lambert be next?

Tracy having chosen her own way into darkness, Nicholas could not place the blame entirely where he would like to. And he could never blame her--the pure innocent mortal seduced by the darkness?--never. Nicholas would be left with no one to blame but himself. And then, at last, the coup de grace would come down upon poor Nicholas--his crushing sense of responsibility. Having been the unwitting, yet still damned, instrument of her destruction, he would feel obligated to care for her. After all, he could hardly leave her to the tender mercies of the...monster who had raised him, could he?

Another doomed partner, proof of the danger he brought to mortals, fear for his precious coroner, the need to take the new fledgling firmly in hand...pain, shame, fear, guilt.... Nicholas would have no choice but to leave this place. This place that somehow tied him more closely to the mortal world and his insane death wish than had any place before it.

And once Nicholas was safely away, a vampire once more, then there would be time for anything and everything else.

"Surprise!"

He felt the soft warm hands against his cool skin as they closed over his eyes from behind. Prepared for her approach, he was able to pause for a moment to enjoy inhaling the scent of warm living blood pulsing through veins just inches from his mouth.

"Tracy." Smoothly he turned to see disappointment stealing over her usually lively expression.

"I *never* surprise you, do I?"

He looked at her--she was pouting like a disappointed child. It was amusing, for the moment.

"I'm afraid not, my dear," his lips curved up slightly. "One of the advantages of age."

Her pout deepened, but a smile was creeping out. "Let's make it a bet then." Her enthusiasm was undimmed by his raised eyebrow. "If I can do it--really *surprise* you, just once-- then you have to do a dedication to me on your show. You have to say whatever I want."

His smile was indulgent, bemused. "You have my word."

Her answering smile was as open as it was sincere.

It was so easy.

She would be a pretty toy for an evening's pleasure. A chance to revel once more in the sweetness of the seduction--the hunt in which the prey finally came begging for its own death.

Vachon might be angry when he returned; it was of no consequence.

Or would he be? On the contrary, he would likely be grateful. He obviously was attracted to this one and would probably have brought her across himself long ago, were he not afraid of Nicholas' wrath. Once Nicholas was safely away, drowning in his own regrets, ready to take the offered hand of an old friend....

Then she was unnecessary. She could be given over to the young Spaniard as a present. After all, it never hurt to be owed a favor.

Dinner at the Trattoria Giancarlo, dancing--a very elegant, very mortal Saturday evening. Then back to his apartment...the first step on the path to eternity.

She lingered by the fire as he poured the drinks--red wine for her, something slightly richer for him. They sat on the expensive leather couch and talked a little, and moved a little closer, and then their lips were brushing together and his were sliding down towards her warm soft throat...

She pulled away suddenly, flushed and embarrassed. "I need to...um...go and...uh...freshen up...," she stammered, racing for the bathroom door.

And he'd let her go, laughing to himself.

When she returned, she was a little more composed, although he could still hear her pulse racing as she sat beside him again.

She had put on a faint fragrance, one of those that changed as it warmed on the skin. Even now it was shifting, as his hand twined once again in her hair, and his lips moved from hers softly along her jaw and down towards the pulsing vein in her throat, from a soft floral to a strong...biting?...

Garlic!

Instinctively he snarled and pushed her away--only to find a small pointed stake pressed firmly against his chest.

He still could have done it--torn the stake from her hand, swallowed the choking nausea, and taken her right then, leaving her a crumpled, lifeless heap on the floor. But his sheer surprise stopped him.

He staggered back a few steps--the ghastly odor was increasing as it warmed against her skin--and quickly regained his composure.

"Oh, I *am* impressed, my dear," he admitted, as he straightened himself up and retook control of the situation. "However did you figure it out?"

"Nick knows you, he said he'd known you for a *long* time."

Her pulse was pounding loudly and distractingly in his ears. "So, then, you know what Nicholas is?"

Tracy gave a little laugh, a slight show of bravado. "Of course. I figured that out months ago. He's not very subtle, you know."

To both their surprise, he laughed. "No. He never has been, has he?"

It should have been so easy.

He'd let her go. She was much too interesting to take so quickly. A sharp mind and a brave soul hidden behind the childish demeanor. Who would have guessed? And knowing she was one step ahead of poor Nicholas, well...that was simply too rich....

It was almost three in the morning, and just before he signed off for the night, the Nightcrawler paused.

"Now, gentle listeners, it is time to speak of vows--of promises made and promises kept. It is so easy at the time. Caught up in emotion or in our own certainty of what the future will hold, we offer a piece of our soul to whatever powers might be listening. A deal, a trade, a wish--a bet made with Dame Fortuna or the Fates or with Destiny.

"And then the wheel turns and what will be comes to pass. And in the joy of victory or the depths of defeat comes the memory. A tickle in the back of the mind, a tug at the edge of the sleeve--a promise to be kept, a vow to be fulfilled. But what matter now? the mind insists. What has happened has happened and cannot be undone. Idle promises played no part in it."

"But deep within there is the nagging, the unease, the primitive fear that such a deal must not be broken. That the wheels of Fate have crushed far greater than you beneath their wheels and ground them nameless into the dust. And so, listeners, we make good the foolish promises shouted at the skies or whispered into the darkness. And in doing so expect not only the balanced restored, but the stage set once again."

"And is it not this, rather than 'honor' or 'integrity' or even our 'good name,' that truly holds us to any vow? For having kept this promise when held to it only by our own conscience, should we not expect to be looked upon with favor the next time we come knocking at Dame Fortuna's door?"

The glowing bars of light set into the slick black surface of the control panel read 2:59.

"So, dear listeners, before the Nightcrawler slips back into the shadows of your mind, he too has a promise to keep...."

His voice dropped to a soft rich purr.

"I am a *good* vampire."

Sitting in the Caddy and carefully ignoring the choking sound from the driver's seat, Detective Tracy Vetter smiled to herself and reached over to turn the radio off.

The Werewolf of Toronto

by Lisa McDavid

"Leroy?" asked Natalie Lambert, scratching the big Siamese behind the ears.

"Aw-rrawh!" Leroy replied on his own.

Captain Joe Reese smiled and shifted his grip on the cat. "Leroy. As in 'Bad, Bad Leroy Brown.'"

Detective Nick Knight came up beside Natalie. "So you've arrested him again, Captain?"

"Denise's Aunt Thelma's in town," said Reese. " She doesn't like being waked up by goblins. It gives her spasms."

"Goblins?" Nat questioned as Leroy said, "n'aww" and rubbed his nose against Nick's hand.

"Yeah, goblins. Took Denise nearly an hour to get the old bat to stop yelling. Leroy didn't mean anything. He was curious and he likes to sleep on top of the guestbed headboard, so of course he leaned over and looked at her. He's always cross-eyed at close range; he always talks in his throat when he says hello. How was he supposed to know Auntie'd go off like a rocket if he touched noses with her? He wakes me up that way all the time."

Nick grinned at the cat. Leroy said, "yahhh!" and climbed higher on Reese's shoulder.

"What did you mean, 'arrested him again', Nick?" asked Natalie. She added hastily as Nick's eyes lost focus and he stared into the distance, "or is it too long to tell?"

The Captain restrained Leroy from an attempted swan dive onto the water cooler. "Knight, it's almost dinner time. Why don't you take Dr. Lambert to McDonald's or somewhere and tell her about it?"

"Yes, Nick," Nat took possession of the vampire's arm. "Why don't you?"

Nick laughed and allowed her to lead him out of the station.

"Ok, give," said Natalie, settling into a back corner booth with her burger and fries. "When and why did Reese arrest a cat?"

"It was Schanke, actually." A shadow crossed Nick's face. Nat put a hand over his, and he managed a smile. "The first Halloween we were partners, which meant I hadn't been on the force long, and Reese had just made Captain but didn't have a precinct yet ...."

Don Schanke stared at the rack of Halloween costumes that had appeared in the hall since the end of his last shift. "No way," he said. "This is the Toronto Metro Police Department, not 'Ghostbusters.' "

"Come on, Schank." Nick was sifting through the hangers. "There must be something here for a man of your elevated tastes."

"That's el grande no-no, partner. No way I'm going out in Yonge Street in one of those things."

"That's up to you, Detective," said Stonetree, appearing in the door to the squad room. "If you want an insubordination write-up in your file, why should I stop you?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't go undercover! But we've got the Vincetti case, and the Howerton Shooting and the absinthe poisoning." Schanke held up the plastic evidence bag he carried as if it were a talisman.

The seal promptly broke and the bag, having been upside down, let its contents fall to the floor.

Nick joined Schanke in the scramble. "A paper napkin? What case is this from?" His vampire senses could smell wormwood.

"Absinthe," Stonetree told him as Schanke rebagged the evidence. "Happened while you were seconded to headquarters on that Chicago thing. The girl who died had the napkin clutched in her hand. It's not much, no identifying marks, but it's about all we have. The host said the napkins and plastic glasses came with the liquor supply. He claims he didn't know the absinthe was the real thing, with wormwood. We can't prove otherwise and it's not him we want anyway. The bootlegger's vanished, of course."

A flashback to the days before absinthe was outlawed in the U.S. and Canada nearly overtook Nick. He fought free of grim memories of madness and death from wormwood-induced brain damage.

Schanke said again, "Cap'n, we're overloaded as it is. Please?"

"Look, Schanke, I know what's on our hands a lot better than you do, OK? I only make the assignments around here." Stonetree added crisply, "The Police Commission's got the Mayor and the City Council on their backs about last year's Halloween Parade."

Nick had resumed his investigation of the costume racks. A grin lit his face and wrinkled his nose. "Yes!!" He snatched an outfit from the rack and disappeared into the locker room.

Schanke looked pleadingly at his boss. Stonetree was reminded of a cocker spaniel awaiting the rolled-up newspaper.

"Here." He grabbed a hanger at random. "Go on, take it."

"Give up, Schank. You're going to have to put the head piece on sooner or later." Nick stood up as a paddy wagon, pressed into service as a personnel carrier, pulled up outside the precinct's back door.

"Yeah, fine for you, Count Dracula!" Schanke rolled his eyes at Nick's red-lined opera cape, evening suit, and purple shoulder sash of a non-existent order. "All you had to do was slick back your hair."

Nick's smile became a full fledged laugh. "Never mind, Fido," he told the werewolf-suited Schanke, who was pulling on a snarling lupine headpiece. "Just chase 'em up a tree until the uniforms get there."

Police Headquarters turned out to be a trailer jammed into an alley off Yonge Street. Captain Joe Reese frowned at a computer printout. "Dracula and the Wolfman. Right. Who are you guys, really?"

"Knight and Schanke, 27th." Nick answered.

"Oh, yeah," said Reese. "Stonetree's Katzenjammer Kids. Try not to do anything heroic, OK?"

By eleven a pirate who was distinctly yo-heave-ho had tried to sell Schanke a bottle of rum which had a plastic bag of cocaine floating in it. Nick had been propositioned several times, not all of them commercially.

Uniformed regular police had taken a number of missing wallet reports, centered on fortune teller who had set up informally in front of a discount electronics store. She was shrouded in a long black dress which was much too large. Her pointed hat was spangled with garishly colored cobwebs, bat silhouettes, and for some reason the Blue Jays logo.

Nick had his palm read as a mark. Schanke stood with his back to them, trying to remember that the window of the Barbary Coast Exotica Company had been chosen because the black velvet curtains made it almost as good as a mirror. The display contents which he could see through the crack involved uniformed parochial school girls in plaid skirts and white knee socks. All of them were engaged in activities guaranteed to get them expelled to the nearest reformatory.

"Uungh-rrow?" asked a voice from the sidewalk.

Schanke looked down. A half-grown Siamese kitten peered up at him. Satisfied that it had the man's attention, the cat said "Yow."

"Nice kitty," muttered Schanke. The nice kitty began to climb his trouser leg. " Nice kitty -- ouch! Go *away*!"

The fortune teller glared down at Nick's hand. "What the hell?" she exploded. "Ok, Mr. Policeman --" Heads turned in the crowd.

"Hey, Gris," Schanke intervened, hastily joining Nick, "can't you take a joke?" He added sotto voce, "Griselda Gunzelheimer. She's harmless. Claims to be a direct descendant of the witch in Hansel and Gretel, does spells for the price of a drink, that kind of thing."

Griselda drew herself up to her full height, which was on a par with the detectives. "Harmless?! Claims?!!" she rasped. "We'll see about 'harmless and claims'!" She spat a verse that might have been an arcane language and snapped her fingers.

"Sure," said Schanke. "What happens, I start croaking and turn green?"

Ms. Gunzelheimer snorted. "You'll both be exactly what you seem." She stomped away.

The hunt for the pickpockets resumed, minus the sting operation. From somewhere a clock struck midnight. An icy blast of wind exploded down Yonge Street. The street lights flared. There was something like a soundless explosion inside a flash of red light. Nick reeled and steadied himself, perplexed that the crowd seemed undisturbed.

Schanke was nowhere to be seen. Nick called, "Schank?"

A howl answered him from the alley on the other side of Barbary Coast Exotica. Nick hurried over.

Schanke was crouched behind the dumpster.

"For God's sake, Schank, that's not funny!" Nick reached down to pull his partner into the light. "Cut the comedy and -- yowch!" Schanke had bitten him, hard. If the night hadn't been cool enough for gloves, there would have been teethmarks and possibly blood.

Schanke came out from behind the dumpster on his own while Nick was clutching his hand. He growled menacingly. His eyes, through the headpiece, were neither humorous nor human.

Griselda Gunzelheimer's voice echoed inside Nick's head. "You'll both be exactly what you seem."

Nick sent a brief prayer of thanksgiving heavenward that he really was a vampire. For him, obviously, the spell had failed.

The werewolf snarled, snapped at his erstwhile partner, and headed out of the alley. Nick followed. He said, desperately, "Myra! If you don't come back here, I'll tell Myra."

Schanke broke stride and looked round with a haunted expression, but he did not stop. Instead he headed straight for a pizza takeout. Half a block away, Nick winced at the odor of garlic.

Great. A hungry, pizza-loving Schanke with lupine delusions loose in a pizza joint. Nick was momentarily sicker than anything the place's garlic could have done to him.

He caught up with Schanke. Telepathy worked on animals, so maybe.... Nick sent a picture of fire and hunters with huge silver bullets into the wolf that was Schanke's mind. Schanke whined, cringed, and halted in his tracks.

"Good boy," muttered Nick. Now, where do you take a police detective who thinks he's a werewolf as a result of a Halloween spell, if you don't want him jugged in the nearest loony bin? His immediate solution to the usual police crisis-- ask Janette-- wouldn't wash. Over the years enough incidents involving real

vampire Raven habitues and goth wanna-bes had led to unpleasantness that Janette now closed the club down on the last night of October and had a party of her own in the basement with her live-in staff.

Natalie was off duty and had said something about helping with a Halloween party for her goddaughter.

That left the loft until Natalie got home. He had to admit that disenchanting werewolves was unlikely to have been covered in Nat's medical education any more than humanizing vampires, but she might be able to tranquilize Schanke until he could track down Ms. Gunzelheimer.

Nick projected an image of his loft, with a nice, fresh, bloody moose carcass in the middle of the floor and the werewolf feasting on it. Schanke yipped and turned in the direction of Gateway Lane.

For perhaps two blocks the plan worked. Then, as they turned beside a brick wall, something said, "Nowww!!" and the half-grown Siamese kitten dropped neatly onto Schanke's back.

Schanke at the best of times was a dog person. Now that he was a wolf-man, his tolerance for cats had evaporated. Schanke cut loose with a growl like a gigantic chainsaw and tried to spring at his unwanted passenger. Unfortunately, this involved attempting to leap onto his

own back. The delusional detective did a complete back flip which brought him down on his side.

Oh, good, playtime! Nick didn't need telepathy to read the cat's mind. He started to throw the fire and hunters picture into Schanke's mind again but the Siamese charged between his legs, followed by Schanke. Before Nick had picked himself up from the sidewalk, the Wild Hunt was in full swing back toward Yonge Street.

Nick flung himself into the air. He was diving between Schanke and the cat when he collided with something that was both hard and soft and said, "oof!" Nick crashed to the sidewalk, flat on his back, milliseconds before Griselda Gunzelheimer landed on top of him. She was still clutching her broom. Her vocabulary included certain words which Nick hadn't heard since medieval Germany.

He got to his feet and helped her up. She shook her head. "Damn pigeons!" said Griselda. "Never know what'll happen when they get into a swarm. Thanks for catching me, young man." She backed up a pace and looked closely at him. Then she began to laugh. "So that's it. I should have known. You have a the weirdest life line I've ever seen in a palm. Is your partner really a werewolf?"

"No!" said Nick. "Look, please take whatever you did to him off; he's got a wife and child."

She smiled. "Sure. Schank's an old pal of mine. The spell would have lifted by itself at sunrise, anyway."

"Then he's all right now?"

Griselda Gunzelheimer shook head. "Nope. I have to look him in the eye to take it off."

Nick groaned. "But he must be halfway to Yonge Street."

"More like three-quarters. OK, Vampire-Whatever-Your-Name-Is, let's get cracking." Griselda positioned herself on the broom and took off. Nick sped along under her.

The dregs of the Halloween parade were still milling around. Yonge Street was completely blocked. Schanke, still in pursuit of the Siamese kitten, hit the crowd like dodg'em cars. He bounced off; the cat wove in and out among the humans.

Schanke rebounded into a pirate whose yell seemed to galvanize the crowd. A free-for-all involving Elvis and a hound dog broke out. Beauty was spotted punching the Beast in the stomach, while three of the Seven Dwarves, all far over the height requirement, tried to pitch a gorilla through a plate glass window. The ape bounced directly into a mummy who resented the intrusion and retaliated with a roundhouse that backhanded Madonna in a protuberant area. She shrieked, pulled a knife and attempted to apply a remedy for excessive hormones which is normally performed by vets. Nick grabbed her wrist with less than an inch to spare.

Police whistles and approaching sirens finally forced a cease-fire. Nick finished up holding Madonna while a couple of uniforms closed handcuffs on her.

"Arrgh!!" Schanke hurtled by him, snarling, still after the Siamese kitten. The cat was yelling defiance but not stopping to argue.

"What the hell is this?" Capt. Reese stepped squarely into the chase. The Siamese vaulted into his arms and settled there, purring. Reese absently scratched its ears. "Schanke --"

The opening was all Griselda needed. She jumped in front of the lupine detective, glared into his eyes, and said something Nick couldn't catch.

Schanke stopped abruptly. "Sorry, lady," he said. "Police business. Wait a minute! Gris?"

Reese forestalled the witch's response. "More like monkey business. Look, detective, since when is chasing a cat like a damn dog in the manual?"

"Gee, Cap'n, I..." before Schanke could get himself into even more trouble, Nick hurried to join the confrontation.

For the first time since Schanke's misadventure had begun, Nick's vampire sense of smell claimed his attention. He said urgently, "Captain, that cat smells of wormwood. You were right, Schank. It caught the wormwood on you from the evidence back at the precinct, so of course it kept coming up to you. Its owner probably smells like wormwood. Maybe the owner's the bootlegger."

"I was? Yeah, I was." The Siamese was rubbing the side of its face against Schanke's arm. Schanke shook his head and tried to look intelligent.

Nick continued. "There's no way to tail a cat, at least not unless you're a cat yourself, so we thought maybe if Schanke got some use out of that wolf suit and made like a dog, maybe we could chase it down here and somebody could grab it." He was on thin ice, but he beamed assurance at Reese. "Captain, I think we've solved the absinthe poisonings."

Reese was made of sterner stuff than Nick had supposed. "Look, Knight, I hate to break it to you, but cats can't testify in court. And if you can interrogate one, you've got a great future ahead of you on Letterman."

"Yeah, but look, it's got a tag on its collar." Schanke had rallied. After a stint as Nick Knight's partner, confusion was fast becoming his natural state.

Reese gently turned the cat over on its back. Nick grasped the metal disk which hung from a thin circlet of brown leather which had been invisible in the night.

"John H. Robinson, 666 Yonge Street. 555-1313," he read. "Captain?"

"Kowalski, Brown, get over there. See if Mr. Robinson's lost his cat and keep your eyes-- and noses-- open for something we can use for a search warrant just in case the judge doesn't think a smell on a cat's fur is enough."

Natalie finished her coke. "I remember the Robinson case. So Reese arrested the cat as an accessory?"

"Yep." Nick helped her into her coat. "So to speak. He had to be boarded as evidence until the trial, but then the Judge remanded him to Reese's custody."

"Didn't Robinson object?" Natalie preceded Nick out to the Caddy.

"No, as a matter of fact. He said it was all the cat's fault. If it hadn't been stupid enough to get caught, he wouldn't have been, either."

Something about Natalie's expression suggested that prison had been too good for John Robinson. Nick didn't need to read her mind to know she was thinking of Sydney. "Poor Leroy!"

"Actually, his name wasn't Leroy, then."

"It wasn't?" Natalie settled into the passenger seat as Nick got behind the wheel.

"No, Robinson was calling him Angelique."

Natalie laughed. "Somehow, I don't think the cat was the stupid one in the family."

No sooner had the detective and the coroner re-entered the police station than a crash, and yells, mixed with wild screams rang out from the squad room. Nick pushed Nat back, grabbed his gun and charged through the door.

"Nice thought, Knight," said Reese, "but back-up's not necessary. Leroy already got the perp. Last time that one gets into the supply closet."

The big Siamese was unable to comment, his mouth being full with a very large and very dead rat. Instead he looked up at Nick and produced a grumbling in his throat which sounded very like a laugh.

Unto Dust

by Jill Kirby

He was the last.

In all likelihood, he was the last living, sentient being to walk the earth. He would not walk it much longer. His strength was failing rapidly.

There hadn't been mortals to feed from for longer than he could remember. Some animals had survived, and the blood of a rat was sweet when you were starving. But even rats had lost the ability to propagate in this wasteland, and they eventually disappeared along with all other animals that vampires could feed from.

They had turned on themselves, and LaCroix had been the final victor as the vampire population disappeared. There was no sun to kill them, but a drained vampire left without a way to replenish himself suffered agonies of tortured thirst, madness, and eventually a merciful disintegration into ash. Only the very old ones lived for long and eventually they, too, were gone. There hadn't been that many old ones left to begin with.

There was no sanctuary, no peace, no succor for the last vampire on Earth. Once he was too weak to fly, LaCroix found a structure - it might have been a building, once - to crawl into. It provided some shelter from the vicious storms that ravaged the planet. He didn't know any longer where he was. Shapes of continents had changed, shifted. He might have been in Canada, or in China, or in Africa.

Inside his shelter, LaCroix lay shivering under a makeshift cover of rags and debris. He had thought it impossible for a vampire to be cold, but this "second ice age" had proved him wrong - over and over again. There was <nothing> but the unrelenting cold.

His thoughts strayed to his children. LaCroix thought of them often. Those he had made, such as Alexandra; those he had killed, such as Daniel. Philip. Margarethe. His favorites - Janette. Nicholas. He had kept those two close for half his life, and losing them to this darkness had been the cruelest blow.

He remembered Janette's face as they knew the meteor was about to hit. She had turned away from him, her voice even. "This is the end, is it not?"

"It is." He did not lie to this one. She did not need lies - she never had.

"Then it is the end for me." He did not immediately understand. "We have a few hours of sunlight left before hell takes over." She turned back towards him, her chin lifted proudly. Her eyes were clear and fearless. "I will see the sun before I go."

Even now, he felt a fierce pride at the remembered courage of his favorite daughter. She had touched his face gently. "You will tell Nicola of my choice?"

He nodded. She left the cellar they were hiding in and met the light. So strong. So brave.

She had been spared the devastation. She had spared herself a lingering death.

Once the earth had stopped shaking from the impact, LaCroix had ventured out into a landscape so alien that he thought he must be caught in a nightmare. Nothing looked like it should, and the smells of fire and death were everywhere. There were still mortals alive then. Most were wounded or crippled; many were mad with grief. LaCroix had ignored them, not even caring to feed, and searched for Nicholas. The connection had been weak but distinct.

He did not have to search very far. LaCroix had found his son huddled in the corner of an old bomb shelter, near the ruins of what had once been a hospital. He was surrounded by debris, and corpses, and rats - the rats had still been plentiful - and covered with dirt and blood. Nicholas was rocking back and forth, eyes shut, cradling a body in his arms and singing as if rocking a beloved child to sleep. As he approached, LaCroix recognized the song Nicholas was singing - an old French lullaby. Nicholas did not stop singing, nor let go of the body, as LaCroix came up to him.

Nicholas was singing to the broken body of Natalie Lambert.

Quietly, LaCroix sat down next to him, resting his back against the wall, watching his son. Nicholas would speak when he was ready. His hands were bloody and raw, and the pain must have been excruciating - he needed blood to heal - but he didn't appear to notice. He just rocked and sang, rocked and sang, his voice rough and cracked but impossibly beautiful.

When Nicholas finally raised his head, LaCroix knew he was looking into the eyes of a man who'd lost all hope. The anguish in them was so great that LaCroix reached out and put one hand on Nicholas' arm for a moment in silent support. "She died instantly." His face was red with dried tears. "She went to the hospital to act as part of the post-impact medical team. The building collapsed."

"It was a merciful death."

"Was it?" Nick's voice was raw with pain. "She begged me to bring her across. I wouldn't." LaCroix could see the self-recrimination, the agony, in Nicholas' face as the tears began again. "She tried to go to someone else, and I stopped her." Nick had to bend his head and compose himself before he continued. "She begged me... and then she stopped begging. She'd still be here if I had done as she asked."

"Nicholas." The tone of LaCroix's voice brought Nick's head up sharply. "Would you condemn your Natalie to <this>?" He gestured around the rubble. "Even we will die, eventually. You might have given her a day, a week - but her death would have been far more horrible. She would have been too young to protect herself, and you could not have kept her safe for long."

"I love her." Nick's arms tightened around Natalie involuntarily. "I love her so much."

"I know." LaCroix had always known, and when he had met Natalie he had understood. He knew, now, what Nicholas was thinking. "You don't want to go on." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," said Nick quietly. "I do not."

"Then do what you must. Find your own peace in this, as Janette did."

Nicholas' slow nod told LaCroix that he had felt Janette's death. That knowledge was certainly part of his pain - but he was also confused and bewildered. LaCroix had held him tightly for a thousand years, and Nick was unable to believe he'd ever let go.

What he could not know, could not understand, is that LaCroix would not damn his beloved Nicholas to the nightmare that was to come. Oh, if Nicholas wanted to stay and fight, LaCroix would be by his side - but Nicholas would lose, eventually. Better that he choose his own time, and his own way.

LaCroix would stay, and fight. That was <his> way.

"What were you thinking of doing?" Somehow, in the obscenity that the world had become, the conversation made perfect sense.

Nick bent his head again, his eyes fixed on Natalie's face. "The sun."

"There is no sun."

"There is, if I go above the clouds."

And there it was. Nicholas, like Janette, would end everything by facing the light.

"But I can't leave her <here.>" Nick's voice was fierce, and he brushed Natalie's hair back from her bruised forehead, his hand lingering with ineffable tenderness. "Not like this. She deserves better."

LaCroix remembered the luminous eyes that had met his bravely, unflinchingly; the unexpected beauty of the woman who fought so hard to love Nicholas despite everything. He rose. "Come."

They buried the body of Natalie Lambert below the broken surface of the earth. LaCroix stood silently while Nicholas prayed with his face in his hands, as the dust swirled around them, as the smoke from fires near and far choked their lungs.

When Nicholas was done praying, he turned and faced LaCroix. "Thank you."

"If there is a God..." LaCroix stopped. If there was a God, then this entire nightmare made even less sense. "If there is a God, I hope you find Him."

Nick was silent, looking at the flat stone that marked Natalie's resting place.

It was time for him to go. "You'll need blood to fly high, Nicholas." Nick's face was uncomprehending, and LaCroix held out his arm, offering his wrist. "Take your strength from me."

So the son had accepted his father's last, kindest gift.

Now, LaCroix lay freezing and close to unconsciousness. He hadn't fed in months. Or years, perhaps. His memories were his companions, and he let himself be lost in them. It was kinder to be with them than to understand where he was, and what he had become.

Janette came to him, swathed in red velvet, and asked him for a dance...

For All the Right Reasons

by Alora Chistiakoff

Natalie stopped her car in front of the old Victorian house and quickly climbed out. She stood in the chill of the dusk, the San Francisco sun setting on the horizon and stared at the front door, wondering if she had made the correct choice--sure that she had, but afraid of the regret.

"Regret is *his* stock and trade, Nat," she muttered to herself. "Not yours." Taking a deep breath she climbed the stairs, only hesitating for a moment as her finger reached for the doorbell. Her stomach churned as she pressed the button and waited for someone to answer the door. "I hope this is the right place."

As the front door opened she was relieved to see that her weeks of searching had finally paid off.

"Hello," Natalie said, trying to mask her anxiety.

"Natalie." Janette gaped before regaining her composure. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Natalie noticed Janette glancing down the scarcely lit streets before returning her gaze to her surprise visitor. "He's not with me, Janette."

The tension seemed to leave Janette's face, and she stepped back from the door. "Please, come in, Doctor."

"Thank you." Natalie stepped through the doorway. She removed her jacket as she followed Janette through the narrow corridor and into a plush sitting room. Janette motioned for her to sit as she lowered herself into a velvet armchair.

"How did you find me?" Janette leaned back and studied her visitor.

Natalie noted that Janette seemed to lack some of the self-confidence that had always impressed her before. "Long story. But it was an accident, really."

Janette arched an eyebrow. "Accident?"

Natalie nodded. "Nick has been looking for you." As Janette's expression darkened, Natalie continued, "And a few weeks ago, I was waiting for him at the loft and a phone call came in on his answering machine. You had been seen in Greenwich Village."

Janette's eyes narrowed. "So, he is, as they say, 'hot on my trail'?"

Natalie leaned back, feeling slightly more relaxed. "I didn't say that." Janette cocked her head, waiting for Natalie to finish. "I erased the message. He never heard it."

For a second time, Janette was visibly surprised. She looked from Natalie to the window and back again. "Why would you do that?"

Nat smiled sadly. "If you wanted him to know where you were, you would have told him yourself, right?"

Janette nodded slightly. "You followed me here from New York?"

"Yes. I've seen more of the U.S. in the past month than I ever thought I would." She smiled. "Or wanted to."

Janette seemed distracted. "A month? What about your job?"

"I quit my job," Natalie said offhandedly.

"You quit?" Janette shifted in her seat. "You quit your job and left Toronto? To find *me*?"

Natalie smiled. "Basically."

"What about Nichola?"

"What about him?"

"Well, obviously he doesn't know where you are. Or why. What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything," Natalie said flatly. "I left him a letter. But there wasn't much I could say, was there?" She stood up and walked around Janette's chair to look out the window. "I just told him that is was time that we both moved on. He and LaCroix have found a peace that has, I'm sure, contributed to his lack of enthusiasm for a cure. And since he doesn't seem to want that anymore, it seemed that our business was finished."

Janette continued to look at the sofa where Natalie had been sitting. "Business?"

"No matter what else we both ever wanted, Janette, it never really got much past 'business.'" Natalie turned to look at the back of Janette's chair. "And we've both had enough. It was only a matter of time."

"Understood." Janette's eyes followed Nat as she returned to her place on the couch. "But that still doesn't explain why you've come looking for me."

Natalie watched Janette for a moment. "I want you to bring me across."

Janette quickly looked away, her expression unreadable.

Nat continued, "There is no one else I can ask, Janette. Nick would say no. And trusting LaCroix enough to actually do it presents a bit of a problem. Besides," Natalie said as she took a deep breath. "I don't want to be tied to either one of them like that."

Janette looked back at her. "After the stories you've heard of LaCroix from Nichola I can understand your hesitation. But you must remember, Natalie, that Nichola's interpretation of those events is, at best, one-sided."

"I realize that," Natalie answered calmly. "But tying myself to LaCroix would mean tying myself to Nick, and I don't want that."

Janette's eyes narrowed. "Ah, so you are not doing this so that you and Nichola can be together?"

"Janette, this isn't about Nick," she said firmly. "This is about what I need for me."

Janette watched her for a moment. "But I myself am 'tied' to Nichola in precisely the way you claim not to want. So through me you would face the same problem, *non*?"

"No." Natalie moved forward to the edge of the seat. "Janette, you may technically be a 'young' vampire, but you are still older than Nick. You don't need him to survive, because even if you don't have the strength that you used to, you still have the knowledge."

Janette's face remained impassive as Natalie continued. "I need *you*. You have severed your ties with Nick, at least as much as possible. And you are the only one who I can

trust to actually bring me across. Even if I wanted him to, Nick wouldn't. Period. Not open for discussion or debate. And LaCroix..." Natalie's voice trailed off as she shook her head.

They sat in silence for several moments as Natalie watched Janette's impassive face, which masked her thoughts. Finally, Janette said, "You still haven't told me *why* you want to be a vampire, Natalie. The most obvious assumption would be Nichola, but you say no, that it is not about him. Then what is it about?"

Natalie looked at Janette as she mentally retraced her reasons before speaking again. "For five years, Janette, I have known about vampires. For five years, I have hidden vampire murders, and treated vampire illness. For five years I have watched as my old life slipped away. A life that had no room for vampires in it. But this new life isn't much of one at all." She stood up again and began pacing nervously. "I no longer live in the 'light' like I used to. But I don't live in the 'night' like a vampire, either. I live in the shadows. Somewhere in between day and night. Not belonging to either, just hanging on to both." She stopped and looked up to see Janette watching her every move.

Sitting on the end table at the far end of the couch she continued. "I can't do that anymore, Janette. I need one or the other. This 'halfway in between' doesn't work anymore."

"Is this really the only option you see, doctor?" Janette watched Natalie's face closely.

"Yes." Natalie shook her head. "I can't go back to a hundred percent mortal existence. I can't go back to not knowing about the world that moves in the dark, and lives for eternity."

Janette opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by Natalie. "No, Janette. No. Even if I wanted one of you to erase five years worth of information from my memory, there's no guarantee that it wouldn't come back." *Like Valentine's Day*, she added silently. "And then what? It comes back and I have to track one of you down to erase it all over again?" She shook her head emphatically.

"I made a choice five years ago," Natalie pressed on. "It was my choice. I made it and I don't blame Nick for it. But it changed my life, and now things can never go back to the way they were."

"Do you really want this, Natalie?"

"You mean do I want 'eternity'?" She sighed. "I am tired of straddling the fence, Janette. I don't belong to the mortal world anymore, but I don't belong to the vampire world either. I need one or the other."

Natalie watched as Janette considered her words. Rising from her chair, Janette motioned for Natalie to follow her. Walking back down the hallway and to the left, they made their way into the kitchen. Janette opened the door to the refrigerator to reveal approximately a dozen wine bottles. Natalie knew they were all filled with blood. Janette reached in and pulled one out. She thrust the bottle at Natalie and said harshly, "Is this what you want, doctor? Do you want to live off of this for *eternity*? I assure you Natalie, from where you sit now, eternity is a difficult concept to fully comprehend, but make no mistake: it is a *very* long time."

Meeting Janette's gaze evenly, Natalie said, "Janette, I have spent the last month trailing you across the continent. I have had time to think this through." She put her hand on Janette's to lower the proffered bottle from her face. "I understand that you want to be certain. I know that you dread the thought of me turning out like Nick. But this is not the same situation. Not even remotely."

Janette returned the bottle to the shelf and closed the refrigerator door. "Come with me," she said and headed for the door.

The icy wind that blew in from the Pacific ripped through Natalie as she and Janette walked the length of the pier. She barely noticed the people milling around as she struggled to keep up with Janette's brisk pace. Once they reached the railing at the end of the dock, Janette stopped, pointed, and said, "Look at that, Natalie."

Natalie looked. The nearly full moon. The ocean. The stars.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Janette whispered.

"Yes."

"But I promise you, after a few hundred years, the view loses it's magic." Janette pushed away from the railing. "It gets old, Natalie. Never doubt that."

Natalie turned to watch as Janette lit a cigarette. "I don't doubt it for a second."

Janette shook her head. "Knowing it intellectually, and understanding it because of experience are *not* the same thing, Doctor."

Natalie stepped toward the vampire. "Janette, for years I have been listening to Nick's regrets. For years I have seen him long for the sun and for food and for humanity. I have *seen* what I will have to sacrifice. But I have also seen what I have to gain. I will have a world that I truly belong in. I don't have that now."

Janette flicked the ashes from her cigarette onto the ground. "You say that you've made this choice knowing what you are getting into and that it is of your own free will. But you also said that this choice was forced upon you by an *uninformed* choice you made five years ago. Which is it, Natalie?"

Natalie turned her back to Janette and faced the ocean again. "Yes, Janette. In essence, I made this choice five years ago without knowing it."

"Then that was neither informed nor deliberate."

"Maybe." Natalie looked over her shoulder at Janette. "But I can't undo what's been done, can I?"

Janette returned to the railing and stood next to Natalie. "No. You can't." Natalie carefully searched her eyes. "Then, please, Janette, bring me across."

Natalie watched as Janette's expression changed from conviction to resignation, and finally to guarded flippancy. "Nichola would never forgive either of us. No, Natalie. I am sorry you came all this way and gave up so much for nothing. But I will not do it." She turned quickly and began walking toward the street.

Natalie stood, dumbfounded for a moment. "Damnit!" Then turning she called out, "I thought you didn't let him control you?"

Janette stopped. Natalie watched as she clenched her fists at her sides and slowly turned around. Very carefully, and very slowly Janette returned to Natalie. Her control was obviously hanging by a thread as she whispered, "He does *not* control me, Doctor."

Nonplused, Natalie responded. "Then you are going to have to give me a better reason for saying no, Janette."

"I have to give you nothing."

Natalie nodded slightly. "Granted. But you need to give *yourself* a better reason."

Janette closed her eyes tightly, before her face relaxed and she reopened them. Her gaze was once again casual. "I do not want a fledgling at this point in my life, Natalie."

Natalie smiled softly. "That's a little better. But try again. You and I both know that just because you bring me over doesn't mean we will be joined at the hip."

"In the beginning it does." Janette watched the water slap against the boats. "In the beginning you would need supervision and instruction. Constantly."

Natalie put her hand on Janette's shoulder. "Look at me, Janette. You and I are in the same boat. We have both given too much of ourselves to other people."

"Nichola," Janette offered.

"Yes, Nick. We *both* did it, Janette. And it's left us both miserable. You lost your family, and I lost my ignorance of things that I probably shouldn't know about. And now, however you want to define it, we are both alone. Isn't it better to build a new life? One that isn't dependent on the past and old mistakes?"

For the first time all evening, Janette's face softened. "You argue very passionately, doctor. You should have been a lawyer."

"Is that a 'yes'?" Natalie held her breath.

"Yes." Janette smiled. "That is a 'yes.'"

Lucien LaCroix: Dance Instructor

by Tippi Blevins

Vachon here. That's my surname. You might have noticed by now that people around here call each other by their last names a lot.

But I digress. I was about to ask myself a question.

How the *hell* did I get myself into this mess? Why the *hell* do I find myself asking that question more and more lately? Ever since I landed - crash-landed, thank you - in Toronto. Ever since I met Tracy.

She asked me to some dance. A gala, she called it. A charity event to alleviate the pain and suffering of the poverty-stricken, meanwhile everyone's wearing designer dresses and eating caviar off of golden plates. Why would she even want to go to something like that? Why would she ask *me* of all people?

And why the hell did I say yes?

"You do know how to dance, don't you?" she had asked me.

"Oh, yeah, sure," I lied. "Taught Fred Astaire everything he knew."

She was so happy, so *perky*, that I just couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth.

After she left the church I went straight to Nick Knight's place. You ever been there? It's spookier than Screed's place ever was. Looks like the apartment building of the damned, if you ask me. Gloomy as hell but I guess it's got a pretty good view.

I knocked on the sliding door. Silence. I knocked again. Nothing.

Maybe he was still at work, I figured. Pulling some overtime to cover the rent. Who knows? Either way, I sure as hell didn't want to go showing my face around the station. Not that I'm scared of the cops, mind you. But Trace can't see me on too familiar terms with Nick. The woman thinks 90% of the population of Toronto is vampires, but she thinks her own partner is just a regular guy who doesn't eat food and can't go out in the sun.

But I digress. Where was I?

Oh yeah. The apartment building of the damned.

No one was there.

So I decided to go to the Raven, hoping that by some weird chance Urs would be there. Urs knows how to dance. Of course, Trace might not be real impressed with me if I showed up at her fancy gala singing saloon songs and dancing the Can-Can. Oh well, a Can-Can dance was better than a No-Can dance.

Besides, I needed a drink. Bad.

I sat at the bar, trying to avoid the angst-ridden wannabes on the dance floor. Everyone dressed in black, pouting into the darkness and quoting lines they heard in some vampire movie or another. Not my cup of blood.

I downed one glass and called for another. I downed that one, too, thinking all the while that it just wasn't the same thing as a young girl's neck.

"Nothing is the same as a young girl's neck," a voice said beside me, echoing my thoughts.

That voice. I felt a little prickle of cold on the back of my neck and turned around. "Hello, LaCroix."

"Well, if it isn't the young Vachon," he said, sitting down beside me. He smiled.

Here's Javier Vachon's quick lesson on smiles: When LaCroix smiles, you get scared. You just *know* he's not smiling because he's in a good mood, but because he's thinking about what he's about to do to you. When he smiles at you, you start backing out the door.

Which is just what I did.

"Well, thanks for the drink," I said. "Gotta get going. I have a fitting for my tux..."

His eyebrows went up. Now I was really starting to get worried. "What's the occasion? Surely the 'rock-n-roll vampire convention' isn't in town again already?"

Biiiig laugh. I smirked. "You know, LaCroix, with your wit it's amazing Hallmark Cards isn't beating down the door to hire you."

LaCroix leaned back against the bar. "Perhaps they did, and I merely... turned them down."

I started backing away again. "Well it's been nice talking to you, LaCroix. Really, we must do this more often..."

"Why did you come here tonight?" he asked, interrupting me.

"I thought it was bingo night. My mistake." I turned to leave.

"You need something," he called out after me. "Why don't you just come right out and ask me? We could spend all night *dancing* around the subject..."

I spun around to face him. "What was that?"

LaCroix spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. "What was what, young one? It's an old saying, you know... 'to *dance* around the subject' is to avoid the matter at hand. Are you avoiding something, Vachon?"

I sighed. "You know, don't you."

"Know what?"

He was playing his game. The control game. He was getting me to volunteer information without giving up anything himself. Damned ancient blood sucker.

"You know about my... predicament," I said finally. "You know about the gala, the charity benefit. How'd you know, LaCroix?"

He shrugged. "How do I know anything? I *just know*."

I was feeling edgy, like I either wanted to take a ride on my cycle or put my head in a garbage disposal. I didn't know which.

"Yeah, well, I'll be seeing you, Mr. Know-it-all."

I started out the door again. Then I heard him humming the first bars of a Strauss waltz. I stopped, flinching like I'd just heard a blackboard being scraped by fingernails.

I turned and stomped over to him. "I need to know how to dance," I admitted.

He gave me one of those 'not quite a smile' smiles. The kind where you can't tell if he's about to eat you alive or wish you a Merry Christmas.

He said in a low, bemused voice, "You mean, in 450 years you haven't learned to dance?"

I made my voice as low as his. "Look, it wasn't exactly a requirement in my line of work, you know. 'See the New World! Pillage and Plunder Native Populations! Must be trained in hand-to-hand combat, look good in armor, and know how to dance!' Cortez and Mikhail Barishnikov, both real tough task-masters."

"Sarcasm," LaCroix began, "is often used as a last resort when true wit and humor have abandoned the mind."

What was I doing still hanging around? Why didn't I just get the hell out of there? Why didn't I just tell LaCroix exactly where to stick his sarcasm?

Because I kept imagining Tracy's face as she watched me stumbling over my own feet.

I sighed. "Look, do you know someone who can teach me to dance or not?"

LaCroix gave a small smile. "I think I know just the instructor."

"They any good?"

The smile widened. "Stick around until after we close," he said. "Shouldn't be too much longer."

He disappeared to go do his Nightcrawler thing and I was left at the bar drinking blood even though I was already full. I would have to remember to drink a little something before I picked Trace up the next day. Probably wouldn't thrill Daddy Vetter if his little girl got sucked dry right in the middle of the dance floor. Talk about great first impressions.

The place finally cleared out a little bit before sunrise. Only LaCroix and I were left. A light dance tune played over the sound system.

I looked all around the Raven. "So where's this instructor of yours?"

He spread his arms.

I shook my head. "Oh no, no. *You're* not..." I couldn't bring myself to finish the sentence. I didn't want to even think about it. Lucien LaCroix, dance instructor. It made me shudder.

"Do you have any better candidates?" he asked.

I had to admit that I didn't.

"Then come here," he commanded. "Dancing isn't a spectator sport."

God, the things I do for Tracy. I went toward LaCroix. When he held out his hands, I hesitated. I eyed him suspiciously.

"Listen," I said, suspiciously, "why are you doing this? What do you get out of this?"

He shrugged. "Can't I do something merely out of the goodness of my old, black heart?"

"No," I said, without a moment's hesitation.

He snapped his fingers. "Come closer," he said.

I did so only reluctantly. We were about two feet apart.

"Do you know anything at all?" he asked me.

"I know that I don't wanna be doing this," I quipped.

He pursed his lips. "I'll ignore that, for the time being. I suppose we should start with something very elementary, something that even a bumbling clod could learn."

I bit my tongue. Literally.

"This is the basic box step," he said. "The partners should be face to face, lady slightly to right, the man's right arm around lady's shoulder-blade, the lady's left arm on top of his arm, with the man's left hand holding the lady's right. Next, you..."

I held up my hands. "Woah, wait, wait. You've lost me. What comes after the face to face part?"

He practically rolled his eyes at me. "It would be easier if I just showed you," he said. "Come here. You be the lady."

I backed up a step. "Hey, why do *I* have to be the lady?!"

"Because *I* am LaCroix," he said, as if that explained everything. Well, I suppose it did. "Now, come." He snapped his fingers.

I went forward, wincing as he put his right arm around my shoulders. He instructed me to place my left arm on top of his arm. I didn't want to touch him, and yet it was unavoidable.

"I won't break," he whispered harshly. "Hold on to me *like you mean it*."

I did as I was told. Abruptly, he pushed me away. "Now," he said, "These are the steps you'll be doing. Forward: on left foot, heel first. Side: on inside edge of right foot, rising slightly to the ball of the foot. Together: drag left foot to right, lower on left foot, and ready right foot for next measure." He looked straight at me. "Simple."

"Yeah, simple." About as simple as trying to take a pee in full body armor. While riding on a horse. At night. With a bunch of bandits chasing after you. Big, mean bandits.

"Now," he said, "you start with the right foot next. Back: on right foot, push off and drag left heel toward you. Side: on inside edge of left foot, rising slightly to the ball of foot. Together: drag right foot to left, lower on right foot, ready left foot for next measure. You simply repeat each set of steps until it starts to resemble a dance. You can rotate a 1/8 turn, a 1/4 turn, or sometimes you don't rotate at all. Shall we try it?"

I swallowed nervously. "OK."

I was the lady again, by the way.

I stepped on LaCroix's feet on my first try.

"You fumbling oaf!" he spat. "Haven't you learned anything?"

I hadn't been scolded so much since the night I lost my virginity. The scolding stung as much now as it did then.

I pulled away from LaCroix. "I'm trying my best! This is my first time, you know!" I shouted. Hmm, come

to think of it, that's *exactly* what I said the night I lost my virginity.

"Let's try it again," he said and motioned me forward.

Reluctantly, I took the position once more. I wanted to me the man for a change. "Maybe it would be best if *I* lead," I suggested.

"You have to learn it backwards before you can do it forwards," he said.

Damn, another quote from the night I lost my virginity!

I submitted. We practiced the basic box step for nearly an hour. He finally deemed me ready to learn the waltz and changed the music to something with a 1-2-3 rhythm.

He said: "While the same footwork can be applied in each dance, the *motion* should be different. The waltz: rise and fall, smooth and flowing - traditional, beautiful. It is very elegant. Do you think you can be elegant?"

I sneered. "Do *you* think you can be civilized?"

He raised his brows. "Why, Vachon, I *am* civilized. Who is teaching whom to dance?"

I grumbled. I had nothing to say.

I quickly learned the waltz. Piece of cake.

"Now let's try the Rumba," he suggested. "This is a slow, sexy dance with a lot of eye contact. Plenty of opportunities for slow, lingering movements... Of course the dancing partners should be sleeping together for best results."

"Hey, now," I said, pulling away. "That's enough of the slow lingering stuff."

He chuckled. "I'm not coming on to you, you know. Is that what you thought?" He laughed.

"I know that!" I said a little too quickly.

He finally let me be the man. And let me tell you, it's not exactly the easiest thing in the world to lead a 2,000 year-old vampire around the dance floor.

"Now, let's learn the Samba," he said. "This is a Brazilian dance. The movements are rolling, slinky, openly sexy. Think of the way a prostitute walks. When you're dancing the Samba, feel free to include suggestive body contact and plenty of motion of the hip region. Come now, Vachon, let's see some of that hip motion."

I politely declined. I was thinking of Tracy -- I swear -- and was starting to feel a little... excited. The last thing I needed was for LaCroix to know the condition of my 'hip region'. Such things can be misinterpreted, you know. That's the kind of thing that gets you chased by a bunch of big, mean bandits while you're trying to take an innocent little pee in the woods.

By nine in the morning, I was an accomplished dancer.

"Listen," I began sheepishly. "I -- I'm sorry."

He looked surprised. "Whatever for?"

"For being suspicious about your intentions in teaching me to dance. What I'm trying to say is thanks." I had to admit it. The guy seemed almost... nice.

He looked me up and down for a long while. "Why don't you stay?" LaCroix asked. "Or are you that eager to try to Samba with the sun?"

Hmm. I had a choice between LaCroix and the sun. LaCroix. The sun. Well, I made my choice.

I'm still alive, aren't I?

Limousine in tow, I showed up in my tux (which, thanks to my dancing lessons, I didn't have the time to get fitted properly) at Tracy's around 7 p.m. that night. The sun was safely down. I was up. What more could I ask for?

Well, she looked great. I looked great. My cummerbund matched her blue taffeta dress. It was just too damn cute to be believed. I forgot the corsage, but I figured she'd be so shocked by my clean-shaven face that she wouldn't notice.

We pulled up at the hotel where the gala was being held and I stopped dead in my tracks. I realized then *exactly* why LaCroix had taught me the box step, the waltz, the Samba... I suddenly realized his intentions.

Disco music was pouring out of the lobby. Not Strauss. Although there *was* some song called "Hooked on Beethoven..."

Strains of the Bee Gees and ABBA played like a bad flashback.

"Hey, Vachon," Trace said beside me. "What's wrong? Why do you look like you've seen a ghost?"

"The ghost of disco," I mumbled. Louder, I asked, "Just what kind of dance *is* this?"

She nodded toward a sign in the lobby.

Polyester For Poverty Charity Dance: Come Relive the 70's!

"It's a disco theme," she said, as if that explained everything. "Why do you think I asked you if you knew how to dance?"

I was starting to wish I'd taken my chances with the sun...

More Things Between Heaven and Earth

by Apache

I called him evil, and then I killed him.

Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?

He weighs a ton, but it's doable. I have these great bungee cords in my car for hauling loads down from my folks' place to my apartment, and now I'm using them to get a vampire body wrapped up in a sheet out of an abandoned church. Bump, bump, bump, Christopher Robin up the stairs.

Vachon, why were you so sure? You got better from being ripped to pieces in an airplane crash, and this little scratch was going to kill you? God, the first I ever saw of him -- his gut ripped open, his cheek open to the bone, forehead open, an arm cut off and then his eyes blinked open and he looked at me.

If only I'd never seen him again. I'd never know – what? About vampires? No, I would have been dead, because Vudu would have killed me. Or the hired killer with the knife down on Yonge Street. Or anything. Oh God, I cared about him and all I could do was be snarky and call him evil.

Bump. Vachon, do vampires diet? Is that blood full of calories or what? Thank god this is a shallow basement....

I remember the place. He told me he put Screed by the water. "He used to be a sailor, you know." When was that, Vachon, in the days of the Spanish armada? You never told me anything....

Vachon probably just flew in here when he buried Screed, but I don't have that option. It took me 45 minutes to get his body into my car, wrapped in a sheet. There was no way I was dragging it from a parking lot to the shore. Let alone the thrilling possibility of running into the park patrol. I was envisioning the explanation: well, officer, it's true I'm about to put this body in a shallow grave, but it's a vampire body, not a human person, so it's not a crime... honest, call the Crown Prosecutor, he'll tell you. How would I know? Well, I'm, uh, a homicide detective....

So I drove my car onto the frozen ground and came down by the lake. It wasn't hard to find the patch of disturbed sod. Strange no one has dug it up. Well, maybe not so strange.

Fortunately for me the soil right by the water is both soggy and sandy. Otherwise, Vachon would have to keep till spring, or I'd have to bring in a backhoe. //That would be an interesting requisition. 'Vetter, you want a what? For personal use? Vetter, you've been seeing that New Age lady shrink a little too often.' //

The New Age lady shrink thinks a vampire killed me in a past life. Great. //Well, doc, I had a big therapeutic breakthrough this week. I killed a vampire. Am I even? Want to break out the crystals and see if they hum a happy tune?// That woman is a fruitcake. A nice fruitcake, but I think she thinks she's channeling Carl Jung. If I were Carl Jung, I'd resist.

//Great, Vetter. Nice thoughts. -- Well, what are you supposed to be thinking about while you're trying to bury a vampire?//

I did have a shovel in my trunk, nice and sharp, so I used it like a pickaxe to break the ground open. I kept at it steadily for a couple hours, and got down about two or three feet. Unfortunately, I didn't have any gloves. //A glove compartment, and no gloves. I never really thought about the name.// I never really respected the Mafia's expertise until this minute. Getting rid of a body is hard. It takes planning. It takes specialized skills. I do not have a future as a Mob enforcer.

Eventually, I needed to take a blister break. I went over to the Taurus, where Vachon was wrapped in a sheet in the back seat, and leaned on the side of the car, breathing hard and looking at all the little sore, puffy things on my fingers and palms.

Wait a minute, Vachon's motorcycle gloves. In his jacket? Back pocket of his jeans?

//Officer, I know what this looks like. Yes, I am rifling the dead vampire's pockets but it's not a robbery. It wasn't even a homicide, technically...//

Because I'd had to open the sheet to get at Vachon's clothes, I was looking at his face again. He looks great. The scruffy grunge look actually turns me off, but he broke all my rules, including that one. Part of me was crazy for him.

I found the gloves. A little help in burying him.... this vampire who kept helping me. It hit me again, and I started crying again, stroking his hair with those awful bangs. "Keeps it out of my eyes, Trace." He just cut it around his face, he said, without looking. No kidding. History's worst haircut, I bet, and you had 500 years to perfect it.

Back to the shovel. Job to do. I got in another hour and a half, thanks to Vachon's gloves, before I needed a break again. I went back to the car, and got in the backseat. Actually, there was so much sand, I was down at least four feet in the soil by now, in fact, maybe even five. One more good long effort, and I'd have it. I had to take Vachon's head in my lap to have room to sit, but I didn't mind.

I stroked his hair some more. I touched his face, but he was as cold as something in the refrigerator. It was hitting me in waves, that he was really dead.

"I didn't believe you could die," I said, stroking his cold forehead, and the tears came back. "I wish... I wish I had told you the other part, how much you gave me. I hope you knew." I sniffled. "I wish you had kissed me again. I guess you couldn't, though. Did you have a girlfriend?" The thought made me snort out a laugh, then cry even

more. "A vampire girlfriend? Did you guys bite each other, or did you kiss? Or didn't it matter anymore after you became what you are? You were always touching me..." Even tonight. I called him evil, and he stroked my cheek. He caressed my chin and shouted at me in the next instant to get the stake and kill him.

It hit me all of a sudden that I was exhausted. In every way. There's no energy left to dig with. If I don't finish up now, I'll still be sitting here with him in the backseat when the sun comes up. I think I don't want to know what would happen then.

The thought made me move again. I dragged Vachon's body out of the car. OK, so it's not a whole six feet deep, but it's maybe four and a half or five... God, this is hard. "You weigh a ton, Vachon," I muttered yet again. Oh, for a block and tackle. //Give me a lever and where to stand, and I will move the world" -- Mrs. Clark, eighth grade geometry, quoting some ancient Greek guy. Ari-something, they're all Ari -something. Aristotle, Aristippus, Aristophanes...// "Get a grip, Vetter," I told myself. The sheer craziness of what I was doing, plus how completely strung out I was emotionally, was taking me right over the edge.

I finally got him to the side of the hole. It was fairly deep. I got him stretched out flat next to it but I didn't want to just roll him in. It was too... rough. So I jumped in, grabbed his feet and slid them in first, then lowered his torso down. Then he was lying at the bottom of the grave, fairly straight. I crouched down by him and touched his cold face.

"I wish you'd told me more," I said. "About the others.... who do I tell? How will they know you're gone?"

"We know."

I almost fell over onto Vachon, I was so shocked. There was a man dressed in black standing right next to the grave, though I never heard him come up -- oh my God, it's that man Lacroix and he just said "we know." //'We.' You lied. Oh shit, I'm dead. He's going to bury me in this grave with you.// I reached for my gun, and realized I'd left it in the car.

Lacroix extended his hand gently. "Do not concern yourself. I'm not here to hurt you."

I don't know why, but I believed him. But I also believed he could rip me to pieces in a second.

I reached out and took the offered hand. It was cold, like Vachon's hands were cold. He helped me up out of the hole -- out of Vachon's grave -- and let go of my hand immediately. Then we just sort of looked at each other for a moment. Why was he here? And there were so many things I wanted to know. Starting with--

"Did you do that to him?"

A little smile. If you could call it a smile. It had that doubleness, the wryness and irony that Vachon always had. And more, much more. Where Vachon was humorous underneath, Lacroix was... terrifying.

"No. And I assure you that the one who did this... has paid." His face changed. "Permanently."

"Another va--" I didn't have to finish; I could see the answer in his face. Something clicked. "The same person who killed Hamid--"

He didn't even let me finish. "Yes."

"Vachon said he knew who the murderer was." I looked down at him. I hadn't folded the sheet over his face.

I looked back at Lacroix. "And you -are- one of them, aren't you? He said you weren't."

The frightening smile again -- kindness and killer, all in one. And a self-deprecating quality-- "How... thoughtful of Javier," he said archly. Then the smile disappeared. "We do protect each other, my dear. You are not to know of us."

A wave of terror rocked me. "I thought you weren't here to hurt me." My voice was little more than a squeak.

Another smile. "Quite true, I assure you. But it is -time- for you to let go of the past."

It made me look at Vachon. //Let the dead bury the dead gets a whole new meaning with you guys.// His face looked so sweet, like he was just sleeping. No breath, and cold as ice, but so beautiful, like that fairy tale with the poisoned apple. //I'm sorry for what I said, Vachon. I hope you knew the other things I should have said.// I was about to jump back in and cover him all the way up, but the vampire stopped me.

"You have done very well, child. But it is time to be done." He handed me the shovel.

Of all the annoying... it was how I always got over Vachon's weirdness, too: he ticked me off and I'd forget to be afraid. "Care to help?" I snapped.

Lacroix shook his head ever so slightly. "It is your office. And, also-- your gift to him, is it not?"

I shot a glance at him. He was absolutely right. Is he being kind? Oh, who knows, he's a vampire.

Still, it was very hard to push that first shovel of dirt onto Vachon. It mostly hit the sheet, but a bit of soil hit his face and I began to cry again. I kept pushing dirt, and kept crying -filling in a hole is a lot easier than making one. It was over in a few minutes, really. The vampire backed off and waited by my car.

I whispered to him a little as I did it. "I'm sorry, Vachon, so sorry. I wish that we-- I'm just sorry." And last of all, "Luck, okay? Really good luck."

I took a minute or two to tamp down the surface, but really I just didn't want to be finished. I even gave the dirt some strokes with my hand to smooth it, as if somehow it was the last way I had of touching his face.

I felt incredibly old and tired when I finally straightened up. And turned around to face the black-clothed figure standing patiently next to my car. I picked up the shovel and trudged over to meet my fate, whatever it was going to be. He had to be here for something.

I walked over and just looked him in the eye. I'd believed him when he said he wasn't going to hurt me, but I was wondering if he was going to do something worse. He stood and looked down at me for a long moment, and said gently, "What will you do now?"

I looked back. "How old are you? He told me he was about 500. I'll bet you're even older than that."

A crocodile smile. "I am somewhat older than that, yes." There was a funny quality of self-deprecation in his answer, a downturn in his mouth, that made me think he might be as old as the stars.

"And the man who killed him?"

Weirdly, what Lacroix said was word-for-word the exact thing I was thinking: "Not a man." A vampire, I meant. But Lacroix went on, "A woman. A child, actually -- a very ancient child."

"A vampire child? My God--"

A wry smile flashed on Lacroix's face. "I would imagine that your God had *very* little to do with this child, Detective Vetter. It was she who killed Javier -- and others."

"No," I said without thinking. "She hurt him, but no. I killed him."

The vampire had been drifting into his thoughts, but now he looked at me sharply. "I beg your pardon?"

"I did it." I sighed. "He was-- crazy. Delirious, like. He asked me to put a stake in his heart." My throat constricted. "He said I had to push it right through." The words came out as a whisper.

"And you did this for him?" Lacroix's voice was smooth, but his eyes were sharp, piercing.

I sighed again, and my head drooped. "I tried, but I couldn't. I mean, I chickened out. But then he threw himself on it while I was holding it." It made me remember so vividly -- tears started again. I brought my hand up to rub at my eyes and runny nose.

"A remarkable story." There was no expression whatsoever on Lacroix's face.

"Yeah, fine, remarkable," I said, crying harder. I didn't want to be remarkable. I wanted to be consoled -- by Vachon. I wanted his softness, no matter how superficial it might have been. Lacroix was like ice; I couldn't feel anything from him.

It embarrasses me to be crying and out of control in front of anyone, but in front of this inhuman being, this other vampire who was so totally unlike Vachon, it was horrible. I turned my back to him, and covered my mouth, trying not to make any sound.

When he touched me, I jumped, and banged my knee against the car. It was just a little pressure on my shoulder to get my attention or something, but I didn't hear him coming. I looked around at him.

He produced a little smile. "Your face is quite dirty, Detective," he said with gentle mockery. It made me angry, which is good because I began to get a grip on myself, thinking, and what's that got to do with the price of potatoes in Calgary? But Lacroix didn't really mean to be mocking, I thought. His face actually seemed kind of solemn. Sad, even.

"It is *difficult* to see a loved one die in any circumstances," he said, his voice taking on a philosophical lilt, like he was debating some proposition, "but even harder when one has... participated in some way, no matter how necessary, how desirable the... ending." I looked at him blankly. Is he telling me that he-- ? Never mind. I don't want to know. I mean, I probably do, but not tonight. I've had enough shocks for one Monday. He was still watching me closely, though.

"Tell me, Detective, would you like to forget?"

I scowled. "No. Of course not."

The twisting, sad smile again. "I myself would, I believe." He drifted off again, then brought himself back to focus with a visible effort. Another smile. "If, of course, I should ever find myself in that position."

"Yeah, if," I said. I didn't have the energy to grill him. It was probably like Reese said -- he's guilty of something -- but-- not tonight. I threw the shovel back in the trunk, peeled off Vachon's gloves and threw them in with it, and closed it. Enough philosophy. Vachon's in the ground. Face the music.

"OK, now what?"

"I believe I asked you that question first," he said.

Vampire coyness. Just like Vachon, even though his manner is totally different, aristocratic where Vachon was cas.-to-the-max, and harder than nails where Vachon was always soft. But still coy -- still irritating. Like Vachon. Annoying, yet--

"Can I say something to you?" I bit my lip. It wasn't as good as saying it to him, but-- "I told Javier I could feel that there was evil in him. It was why I thought you were, um, what you are -- it's the same. But I never got a chance to say that I knew there was more." I looked up at the vampire's eyes, but his whole face was utterly inscrutable. "That I was sorry. That I knew it hurt his feelings -- knew he had feelings." I chewed on my lip some more. "You called him Javier-- is that why you're here? To say goodbye to him?"

The vampire gave a little laugh. //Guess not.// But his answer surprised me.

"It seems that I am," he said, "though I can't say that had been my intention. Another...*friend* of his spoke of a gift, earlier tonight." The painful smile curled his mouth again. "Perhaps we have all received them, in the midst of this pain."

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He saw it, and went back to his question. "What will you do now?"

I shrugged. "Go home. Call the precinct and say I'm not coming back in. Clean up. Sleep." Why was I giving this creepy guy a totally honest answer? "Cry some more, probably."

"Yesss." Another downturned smile. "*Sunt lacrimae rerum,* even now." His eyebrows quirked. "'There are tears in human affairs,'" he translated for me. "The poet Vergil."

"Human," I said tiredly. It made him smile again. "Quite right," he said. "In -everyone's- affairs, indeed."

He opened the driver's door of the Taurus. "Come, Detective Vetter, you've had a difficult night."

I got in, sliding behind the wheel and reaching to turn the key in the ignition. Lacroix was holding the door like he was about to close it. I glanced over at him, noticing how pale his gray eyes were, and then I thought I heard a sound, an echo, or something--

"--a difficult night. You will go home, and take a shower, remembering a young Spaniard called Javier Vachon. You learned that he was a vampire, and he told you he had searched the world for centuries without ever finding another such as himself, and that though he had created a companion for himself in his loneliness, his creation would feast only on vermin and ultimately died. You were fond of each other, as young people are. Perhaps it was love. Perhaps it was merely the attraction of good to evil in both of you, for the two are forever clinging to each other. Eventually, as you knew he would have to do, he left, and you wept."

I was in this dark room, with a pale gray light, and there was only this voice to hang onto-- it had stopped, and without the voice there was nothing, nothing. Then the whispery echo started up again: "But that was not all, for in the end you learned that he cared deeply for you. That evil incarnate was capable of love."

Visiting Hours

by Calliope Monsoon

Tonight, he'd stay an hour or so. He would just sit with her for a while, then go home to his wife. Easing himself down in the chair next to her bed, he groaned softly; his tired muscles protesting until he shifted around enough to find a position that his back and neck both found acceptable.

"Too many late nights," he muttered absently to himself as he reached over and took her hand, paper white and limp as always. "You know all about that, don't you?" he asked, as his thumb lightly caressed her knuckles. He couldn't remember when he'd started talking to her. It had just happened, and now the silence of the room seemed unnatural when he didn't.

He talked. He told her about the new cases they were working on, about the mild skirmishes between partners that littered his days and nights. He described the criminals they'd apprehended during the week, and the witnesses who helped them do it. He told her about the men, women and children who had been silenced forever by the people it was his job to catch. Talking somehow made it all seem better. And he knew that she would want to know.

A nurse came by, stepping quietly into the room to check the chart and take her pulse and temperature. Then she left, with a quick smile in his direction. He recognized her, though he didn't know her name. He knew everyone here by sight and they all knew him, all quietly indulged his late night visits to "that poor woman in 208." She pulled the door shut after her, giving them some privacy.

They didn't have to tell him he was Natalie's only visitor. He could see it in their faces.

Joe tightened his fingers around hers for a moment, and sighed. "That new guy, Morris, the one they replaced you with? He's a joke. Me and half the other captains on the force want him out as soon as possible. Guy cuts and files his reports as quickly as possible, then it's 'outta sight, outta mind.' He doesn't care. He's just collecting a paycheck, waitin' for that one case that'll make him famous." He paused and looked down at her quiet, still face. "That's something we could never say about you. It was never just a paycheck to you." Joe leaned back a little more in the chair. "I tried to tell him about you," he added with a small shrug. "How good you are, how hard you work..."

His throat felt tight, and he blinked, taking a deep, calming breath. Suddenly he couldn't bear to look at her, so still and quiet; so he lifted his eyes quickly to the ceiling, then turned his head and glanced over toward the door.

He hadn't heard her enter, hadn't felt the faintest stirring of air that would have alerted him to the presence of someone else in the room. But she stood there now regarding Natalie with the most solemn expression he'd ever seen on anyone's face.

Joe rose, and the woman glanced up at him, then stepped forward into the small pool of light given off by the lamp over Natalie's bed. "You're Knight's friend," he said, recognizing her immediately. "The nightclub owner." It had been several years and he'd only seen her once, but you didn't forget a woman who looked like her.

Ever.

She nodded tentatively. "I did own a club here, yes. My name is Janette de Brabant."

"Do you know where Knight is?" He tried hard to keep the edge out of his voice.

Janette closed her eyes at that, and after a moment, shook her head. "I do not."

"I'm going to have to ask you to come down to the station with me," he began. "We have a lot of questions about Knight that I have a feeling you can answer." But he knew it was useless even before he said it. The mysteries surrounding Knight and his disappearance were better left alone, and the sudden flash of defiance in Janette's eyes only confirmed his suspicions. But he had to *try*, even if he only got one or two answers for himself.

She didn't respond to that, only nodded her head at Natalie. "What happened?"

"It's a long story."

"I have time," she said, the barest traces of a smile touching her lips, though he noted that it never reached her eyes.

With a sigh, Joe walked over and pulled the second chair next to his, facing the bed at a slight angle. "Please, have a seat, Ms. de Brabant. "

She walked over. Instead of sitting down immediately, she lingered by Natalie's bedside, looking down. Then she reached out and gently turned Natalie's head to the side. He noted her composed and neutral expression as she examined the two scars on Natalie's neck for several long moments.

"Those were the only wounds," Joe said, breaking the silence. He indicated the chair once again with his hand, then resumed his own seat once Janette was comfortable. Absently, he reached over and picked up Natalie's hand, giving it another reassuring squeeze as he began.

"It happened about eight months ago. It was like the whole world went to hell all in one night. I remember I was just on my way home." He smiled at the memory. "It was my wife's birthday. I was going to surprise her by coming home early. A perp up at the 96 got loose, got hold of a gun. Before anyone knew what happened, he'd shot and killed Tracy Vetter."

"Nick's partner," Janette said softly.

Joe nodded slowly. "Normally I would've waited and just sent my condolences later, but with Schanke and Amanda Cohen having just died... Well, I thought it might not be a bad idea to stop by, see how Knight was doing, even though he wasn't one of my detectives anymore. I still like the guy, even if he is a bit strange."

That earned a small smile out of Janette.

"His captain was Joe Reese. I like Reese, but the guy doesn't know how to team people up. Knight and Vetter?" He shook his head slowly. "Too much alike. Loners, arrogant." He paused at that, and glanced over at Janette. "If you have a good partnership, you give them their heads. Nick and Schanke? I gave them a lot of rope, didn't ask a whole lot of questions about how they were getting things done. They were a good team. They got the job done. I tried not to wonder too much about the things the perps said they'd seen when Knight arrested them. Like, he'd come out of nowhere, or saw and heard things he couldn't have." He looking over at Janette as he spoke. "There was even one guy who swore Knight had *flown* after him. And another who said Knight was some kind of monster with big fangs and glowing green eyes."

There was that careful, neutral expression on her face again. "What happened the night Tracy Vetter died?" was all she said.

He was disappointed. He'd been hoping for some reaction out of her, something. But he realized that well-schooled expression told him she'd dealt with, or rather avoided, these same kinds of questions many times before. The fact that she hadn't reacted was information in and of itself.

"The night Vetter died," he repeated, nodding his head. "I swung by Knight's place on my way home. Something was wrong; I could tell as soon as I went to the door. He's got this great big security system. Alarms, the works. It was all off. Anyone could've waltzed right into the place."

"What did you do?"

"Went in. I thought the place was empty at first. You ever walk into a place and you know it's empty, but that someone was just there, and ran out before you got there?" He was being totally serious, and Janette slowly nodded.

"That's what Knight's place felt like that night. I went up the stairs and went inside. I didn't see her at first."

He looked down at Natalie then, and shifted her hand in his. When he looked back up, Janette's attention was riveted to the still form lying in the bed next to them. "I thought she was dead at first. I called for help anyway. When they were on their way, I checked again. There was a pulse. It was barely there, and I just sat there until the ambulance came. I thought her heart would stop beating while we were waiting." Then he added, "I wondered what I was going to tell them about the marks on her neck."

Janette looked up at him then.

Falling silent, he thought about the last several months, about his lonely vigil at the hospital. Then he looked up. "Knight did this, didn't he?"

He expected nothing. He expected her silence-- it didn't surprise him, or even anger him. The fact that he wasn't getting any direct answers to the questions that mattered to him became meaningless in light of the utter sorrow and pain looking out at him from behind that well-placed mask. He had his answer, but not in so many words; and as he'd known would happen, he couldn't find it in himself to hate or blame Nick Knight even though he wanted to. He'd already figured out too much on his own.

"Why are you here?" Janette asked, breaking the spell.

Joe blinked, then shrugged. "I dunno. I don't know if she's even in there anymore. The doctors tell me it doesn't look good. She'd lost too much blood. There was a lot of damage." His voice was beginning to sound gruff, even to his own ears. "She's a good person. Works harder than anyone I've ever met. She helped us put away a lot of scum. I just..." He paused and swallowed. I just want to do right by her. I don't want her to think she's all alone."

This time Janette's smile was genuine, and she reached over to gently place her hand on his arm. That gave him the courage to continue.

"Sometimes I think that if I had it to do over again, I'd turn and walk out. Let her die. Let her find some peace."

Janette's sigh was almost imperceptible. "I'm beginning to understand why Nick liked you so much."

Joe glanced over at her sharply. "I thought that right up until you showed up." He licked his lips nervously and forced himself not to give into the urge to look away. "You haven't answered my questions, not really. But I understand a lot of things better now than I did before. I've had some things confirmed." It was as if he'd become hyper-aware of everything around him: the sound of his heart, the feel of Natalie's cool hand in his, the buzz from the light.

Drawing a deep breath, he asked, "Can you help her?"

He regretted the words almost instantly as he saw her eyes close, and he imagined that she did so to shut out a sudden wave of pain that washed over her. But the words hung in the air between them, and he couldn't take them back.

"Can you help her?"

With her eyes still closed, Janette spoke, softly. "I don't know if it would be the right thing to do."

Joe thought about giving her all the arguments, about whether or not it was better to let her lie here and rot, with tubes in her and no mind left to care. He thought about getting angry and demanding that she put right the mistake that Nick had made. Or at the very least, demanding that she tell him where Knight was, so that he could go out and make Knight face up to this. He even briefly considered trying to blackmail her.

In the end, he gave her the only argument that he knew would work. "Look at her," he said simply. "Look at her, remember who she was, and then decide for yourself if it would be the right thing or not. I'll accept your decision, whatever it is."

And he watched, as she did just as he asked. As she opened her eyes and looked over at Natalie Lambert; at the scars on her neck, at her smooth white face and thin wasted body.

"There was a time when I wouldn't have hesitated to do what you ask," she began, eyes still fixed on Natalie. "A time not so long ago when there wouldn't have been a question. But a lot has happened since then."

"Lemme guess," Joe said when she paused. "Knight... *happened*."

Janette nodded. "Very perceptive. He sowed the seeds. He didn't know. Nicolas...did something. He gave me something that I told him I did not want. He told himself he was doing the right thing."

"Was he?"

"If you had asked me that right after...he gave it to me...I would have said no. Now I'm not sure. I think it will not be too much longer before I will say 'yes, he did the right thing'." There was a faraway look in Janette's eyes as she spoke. "You've caught me at a bad time."

"Then why did you come here tonight?"

Her brow furrowed. "I'm not sure. I think I hoped things were not as bad as I feared they were." This last was said with another long look at Natalie. Joe didn't want to know what she was thinking at that moment.

"Will you help her?" It was the last question he would ask her tonight.

Tears were gathering in the corners of her eyes. Joe could see them glistening there; and if some part of his mind told him they looked a little too dark for normal tears, he quieted it by looking back down at Natalie's hand clasped in his.

Janette didn't say anything, but reached across the small space between them and took Natalie's hand from his, gripping it fiercely in her own.

He knew then that everything would be all right, that he had somehow managed to do right by Natalie. That was all he'd really wanted since that night, and every night since that he'd spent warring with himself over whether or not he'd done the right thing.

Joe had no words, no questions. He merely nodded his thanks at the woman sitting with statue-like stillness in the chair opposite him, and rose. Leaning over, he brushed the hair back from Natalie's forehead and kissed her softly. Then he straightened, and for a moment placed his large, rough hand over the joined hands of the two women.

Those all-too-familiar faces behind the desk glanced up at him as he walked down the hallway to the elevator. They smiled, and said they'd see him tomorrow evening. Joe just smiled back at them and thought about his wife's birthday. It was only a few months away.

Twice in One Lifetime

by Jane Credland, Cynthia Hoffman, Bonnie Pardoe and Amy Rambow based on a story concept by Cynthia Hoffman and Jane Credland

Lucien Lacroix sat at the window and stared out at the stars over Mount Vesuvius. After decades of planning, everything was about to come together. He had manipulated and cozened, bribed and coerced successive mortal governments to get the necessary permissions and permits to build the palazzo this close to Vesuvius. He was now as near as humanly (and inhumanly) possible to where he had lived as a mortal.

"It is done, my Lord." Ferragimo's face, carefully schooled into a blank expression, appeared on the desk monitor in front of Lacroix.

"All of them have been delivered?" Lacroix watched the tiny puffs of smoke that Vesuvius had just emitted. He was not concerned; even inactive volcanoes needed to release pressure.

"Exactly as you requested. There were fewer losses than we expected. Only two of the messengers disappeared en route."

"Good." Lacroix reached behind and snapped off the monitor. They would all come to the celebration. Of that he had no doubt. Some to try to wreak revenge; others to pay their respects; the rest out of curiosity. Lacroix perused the invitation, contemplating the reactions of his guests as he read:

May this day be more and long desired; and with the flame of love be bright, as with the light of bonfires. Then the birthday shines, when logs not burn but men. [B. Jonson]

Your appearance is commanded at Il Palazzo, Pompeii, Italy on the occasion of the 2,000th birthday of Lucien Lacroix. Festivities begin precisely at sundown. Liquid refreshments, both animate and inanimate, will be provided. Appropriate gifts graciously accepted.

The invitation caught up with Alyce Hunter in a tiny office in Florence, where she was working as a historical researcher on the set of a docudrama about the life of Lorenzo de Medici. After six weeks, she was still trying to understand what she was being paid to do. The producers and director certainly didn't seem to be interested in any of the historical inconsistencies that she pointed out. However, the job paid well, and it was as close to archeology as she could get for the moment.

As Alyce read through her invitation, curiosity rapidly turned to anger. Old resentments came bubbling to the surface, and her tenuous emotional equilibrium dissolved. It wasn't bad enough that Lacroix had ignored her ever since she had been brought across. Now, when it was to his advantage, he wanted to play "Master". Well, he could think again. She had survived this long without him, and she would continue to do so.

Waking up alone, laid out in a cheap, fiberboard coffin, had been one of the most traumatic experiences she had ever had. By the time she forced her way out through the lid, she was only inches away from the fire where her body was to be cremated. She occasionally felt a twinge or two of regret at the death of the funeral director who had been running the oven, but she had been so hungry.

The man's death was all Lacroix's fault. She had no idea why he had chosen to make her a vampire after Nick Knight had refused, but the least her Master could have done was to stick around and teach her what she needed to know. Instead, he had abandoned her completely -- no instructions on how to survive the initial, uncontrollable hunger; no information about the Code; not even a helpful hint or two about how to find blood without killing mortals. Lacroix hadn't had the decency to answer any of her frantic cries for help. Oh no ... she had had to indenture herself to the Archivist to get herself out of trouble. All those years spent as Dorian's lackey: bring this, do that, come here, go there. She hadn't had a moment's peace. Alyce growled, the noise rumbling and echoing through the room. With an effort, she calmed herself down enough to re-read the invitation. "Appropriate gifts graciously accepted," she snorted. "I'll give him an appropriate gift: a stake through the heart, followed by a sword to cut his head off and fire to reduce his remains to ashes. He's not too old and powerful for *that* to work."

It did not take long for Alyce to calm down and make plans. Luckily for her, almost everyone in the vampire community had heard of Lacroix. It hadn't taken more than a couple of conversations and a few bottles of wine-laced blood to get someone to tell her on what day the party was going to be held. Of course, finding a suitable present would have been a lot simpler if Lacroix had allowed Dorian to interview him, but the ancient Roman necklace should be acceptable. It better be. At black market prices, that piece would have cost her quite a lot ... if the seller had survived the transaction. She would retrieve the necklace once she'd finished with Lacroix. It would match her black dress perfectly.

Acquiring a sword cane had been relatively easy. The problem was the stake. Not locating one. That had been accomplished without any difficulty whatsoever. Pieces of sharpened wood were sold in almost every camping store, not to mention lumber outlets. What she couldn't figure out was how to disguise it. She certainly wasn't going to be allowed to waltz into the party carrying a two by four with a point on one end wrapped in a big red bow, now was she? Alyce sighed loudly and contemplated the offending implement of destruction. If worst came to worst, she would just turn it into part of her evening dress.

On the other side of Italy, the body of a messenger slid off Janette's bed and onto the floor with a soft thud. Not a

bad looking mortal, if one could accurately judge such things after death. What she was going to do with the body was something Janette really wasn't prepared to think about just yet. Accidents like this one, in this day and age, were somewhat more complicated than they used to be, and living in a brand new city, without the connections she used to cultivate, keeping them secret could be downright inconvenient. Janette sat back and remembered a scene in a movie from years earlier, a rather stylish movie about vampires. They had solved such problems by keeping an extremely large furnace in the basement of their home. Convenient, she supposed, but highly impractical.

As she lay back on the bed with a satisfied smile and considered her options, the invitation delivered to her by the unfortunate messenger, now lying on the bedside table, caught her eye. Arrogant of him, to invite her to a party and neglect to allow her to share in the planning of it. That was not something that would ever have happened *before*. In some ways, her new relationship with Lacroix still made as little sense to her now as it had 40 years ago. While being essentially masterless had its advantages, at times like this -- she spared yet another glance at the body crumpled in a heap on the floor -- she wished she had someone to share things with, the way she used to share such things with Lacroix, before Nicolas, that is. Lacroix would understand what had come over her; he would understand without asking her uncomfortable questions and he would even be able to explain it to her in a way that made perfect sense. If he were here, she would be able to brush it off as a slight miscalculation.

Nicolas, without a doubt, would remind her that accidents such as this were totally uncalled for in this age of artificial blood products. Artifice, however, never tasted this sweet. Where was he anyway? Would he choose to be summoned by Lacroix in this way, or would he rather tiresomely insist that he was his own person and need not heed the call of his elder? Resolutely shaking off thoughts of her erstwhile master, Janette picked up the invitation, reopened it, and perused its contents. "Appropriate gifts graciously accepted," she read out loud. "Yes," murmured Janette, "I'm sure they are. But first things first." And she began making phone calls.

Half a world away, Javier Vachon sat up suddenly in bed, blood-sweat beading on his pale skin. He took a few quick, deep breaths before shaking the last remnants of the nightmare: the ragged, torn flesh, the nerve-shattering screams....

He reached over and placed his hand on Cenora's bare back, running it lightly over her skin, pausing to fondle the silken strands of thick, black hair which spilled carelessly over her shoulders. She shifted slightly beneath his touch, but did not awaken.

Vachon got out of bed and walked across the room to the small wood table which served as a desk. Bending down, he pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from the trash can, and smoothed the parchment out on the desk. "Your appearance is commanded ..." he read. He paced back and forth between the bed and the desk, scrunching the parchment tighter and tighter in his fist, before pausing and smoothing out the ball of paper again. "Appropriate gifts graciously accepted," the invitation informed. "Appropriate gifts?" Vachon fumed at Lacroix's arrogance. "A mahogany stake through the heart would be pretty appropriate!"

"Javi?" Cenora yawned. "You smell of blood. What's wrong, mi amo?"

"Nothing, Cenita. Lay down and go back to sleep." Vachon sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her close. Cenora snuggled her head against his shoulder.

Vachon sat perfectly still for a few moments before slowly nodding his head. Though Cenora must read parts of it from his blood, he had not told her much about his past. And he never spoke of Toronto. Never mentioned the blissful boredom he had experienced there; the surprisingly intriguing young woman who resembled the girl he had left behind in Spain five hundred years ago; the self-flagellating vampire foolish enough to want mortality; the general turned bartender who dominated the vampire community as the gods had ruled the Romans thousands of years ago; his lost companions who meant more to him than he ever dreamed possible. And he never, ever, spoke of the witch -- the demon daughter of Lacroix -- who had infected him with her rampant insanity. Her poison had lingered -- wild images of tortured men, women, and children tormented him at the bottom of his dark grave. It was a hell no mere god could have created. The visions faded when consciousness returned; his sanity took much longer. His sole thought while slowly digging himself out of his dirt prison was Divia's slow, painful death. He searched for her for years before finally learning of her demise at the hands of her immortal grandchild, Nicholas Knight.

Four decades had passed without the nightmares -- until Lacroix's invitation arrived. Since that day, they had come more and more frequently; at first they only tormented his sleep, but now even his waking hours were disturbed. "Damn him. Damn him and his incestuous progeny!"

Cenora felt the muscles in his body tense again. "Javi ...." She stroked her hand across the dark stubble on his face.

"I have to go." Vachon ignored her touch. "It's the only way to stop these nightmares."

"Then I will go with you."

"No, I ... I need to do this alone."

"Then, before you leave...." Cenora caressed his face again, drawing him down for an enticing kiss. This time, he responded to her touch. The orphan vampires tumbled back onto the bed in a tangle of sheets and pale, sinewy limbs.

"You know Janette, there really is no excuse for such behavior in this day and age. There are plenty of places to get artificial blood. Exactly what possessed you to kill this poor mortal?"

Janette barely stifled her laughter. Honestly, the man was so utterly predictable. She nudged the body on the floor with her stocking clad toe and thought of the wonderful irony of finding this particular man standing in front of her. Just her luck, she thought, that her phone calls had uncovered Nicolas, recently arrived in Rome as well, and for the tedious price of a short lecture, more than willing to help her out of her current predicament. Anything to be the Knight in Shining Armor again, yes? She really must remember to inquire what name he was using this time. Something eminently chivalric; of that she was reasonably certain.

"I honestly do not know what came over me, Nicolas. I was so sure I was being careful. At least I thought I was. You know how it is sometimes, yes? Still, I do believe

Lacroix knew I would not be able to resist him. Do you not think that is why he sent this particular one to me?"

She watched Nick's face as he maneuvered the body into a body bag and slung it over his shoulder, testing its weight. If it hadn't been a dead body, the weight would have proved no problem. As it was, he was forced to flip the body bag over his shoulder onto the end of the bed. He dropped down onto the bed next to it to consider what it might take to convince Janette to help him out. Janette moved to stand in front of him.

"Have you arranged for an escort to Lacroix's party yet?" she inquired. "Since we are so conveniently now residing in the same city, perhaps we might accompany each other?"

"What if I haven't decided yet if I'm attending," remarked Nick, realizing that for the time being, he would be unable to lift the body off the bed with Janette standing directly in his way. "Besides, what does one give to the man who has everything? Or were you planning on giving him this body to add to his collection?"

For the second time in as many minutes, Janette found herself stifling a smile. How wonderfully odd it was that she found herself able once again to smile around Nicolas. The comfort she was taking in that fact made her consider other, more intimate possibilities. No time like the present, she thought. Reaching over toward Nick's face, she brushed an errant lock of hair away from his forehead, trailing her fingers slowly through his hair and down the nape of his neck.

Nick gave a startled look up at Janette. This was an unexpected turn of events. He had of course hoped, but hoping was different from expecting. After the arguments over his decision to keep her alive, Janette's coldness toward him, and the gulf that had sprung up between them after that, he had not been sure that she would ever want anything beyond civility with him. She certainly hadn't evinced a desire for more in the few times they had seen each other since that night in Toronto.

Then again, there was always the possibility that he was misinterpreting Janette's intentions.

Men, thought Janette. Utterly lacking in subtlety. Deciding that Nick needed a little more encouragement, Janette knelt down between his legs and began pushing his jacket off of his shoulders. Catching Nick's gaze, she purred, "A bit warm in here, n'est-ce pas?"

"Um.. uh.. yeah. It is a little warm." He visibly relaxed, smiled encouragingly and moved his arms to make it easier for Janette to finish removing his jacket. He took a deep breath and pulled her closer to him. Their lips met in a long, searing kiss, and as Nick's eyes began to glow, his lips moved down her throat, the slow, liquid pulse of her heartbeat against his skin.

"You will accompany me to the party, yes?" Janette whispered seductively into Nick's ear.

"Whatever you want, Janette," he murmured, as he rolled onto his side and carried her with him toward the center of the bed. "Whatever you want."

Yes. This party was something to look forward to attending. Wearing Nicolas on her arm would be the perfect accent to the dress she had yet to acquire. In fact, if she played this one properly, she might even garner a fine piece of jewelry out of it as well.

The body, its disposal momentarily forgotten, once again fell to the floor with a soft thud.

The following week, on the day of the party itself, Nick paced back and forth across the narrow band of shadow between the open windows of his hotel room. Sighing, he dropped into the one chair on the shadowed wall. He watched the dust motes glide slowly through the yellow, afternoon light, and then stared down at hands which dared not do the same. He smiled wistfully at himself for thinking, once again, that he already shared Tantalus's Hell -- that which he wanted most forever just out of his grasp. Finding himself wistful rather than bitter, Nick glanced at the carefully wrapped package sitting on the bed, and gave himself over to the memories.

Lacroix's minions had taken no chances of Nick not receiving an invitation. As if the first four copies weren't enough, a fifth had been delivered to his house early last month by a silent young woman whose huge, sad eyes peered up at him from beneath a blue, knit cap.

"May I help you?" he tried to remember if this diminutive figure belonged in either of the undergraduate anthropology sections he was teaching this fall. She had stared up at him, her melancholy eyes probing his face for something Nick instinctively felt to be his vampirism, or his quest -- those things which marked him out as different. He was chiding himself for leaping to conclusions, especially such self-centered ones, when she apparently found what she was looking for in him, and pressed an envelope into his hands.

Nick sighed again, and glanced at the invitation sitting alongside the large rectangle wrapped in brown paper. The shadows had crept across the room while he'd been lost in thought, but they hadn't yet reached the compressor-cooler in which he was carrying his imitation-blood supply, and for that he was suddenly grateful. He couldn't afford to start blaming Lacroix again. It wasn't fair to Lacroix, and it could be fatal to the soul Natalie had lost her life in proving he still had. But the instinct to drown them both in red oblivion never went away. His fingers traced the edge of his prison, which he could truly see beyond for the first time in decades. He had hope again. And when the blood drowned the memories, it drowned the hope too, as it had done for years after ... Toronto.

Whatever the cost, those six years in Toronto had been some of the happiest of his life.

He let his hand fall. The last two years had also taught him a lesson he'd been unable to uncover in the previous 799. Lacroix's behavior didn't spring from some unnamable well of evil; he hurt because he had been hurt. It did not excuse him in the slightest, but it explained him, and that explanation had been the key to Nick's emotional freedom. When Lacroix had seen sympathy in Nick's eyes for the first time, he had needed it too badly to reject it. The second time, he had been afraid to live without it. Lacroix had saved Nick's life and stood a kind of suicide watch; they both knew that Nick would never take his own life, but Lacroix had to be sure Nick would ask no other what he had asked of him.

And Nick could be grateful for that now. It didn't wipe out what had gone before; nothing could do that. But it had been an exchange of equals that created a new footing between them. Nick had kept Lacroix from saving Divia, and Lacroix had saved him. Nothing could ever be quite the same after that. Nick had seen Lacroix less frequently these past decades than any time since the eighteenth century, and

he believed that the tenuous peace he'd learned to find in that absence had grown up on both sides.

If such peace could happen now, why couldn't it have happened long ago? When he had seen Lacroix vulnerable to Divia, Nick had felt compassion for his master. He had seen Lacroix that defenseless exactly once before and responded with arrogant self-righteousness. If only he had shown compassion then, how different his world might be today. That was why this gift was the most "appropriate" he could think of.

The light had retreated to a red glow on the horizon, touching only those without walls and roofs. Nick shook off the self-reproach he knew so well, and removed a measured packet of imitation blood from the cooler. Ten years on pseudo-blood -- smiling at the memory, Nick raised the packet in a dual toast to the cleverness of the inventor and to not having to depend on Lacroix's idea of hospitality.

Dropping the unmarked plastic in the recycling bin, Nick retrieved a velvet-covered jewelry box from the top drawer of the dresser, and strode over to the bed. Instead of picking up the broad, flat package, he stopped indecisively and thought again about what the birthday gift conveyed. "What I have always wanted: companionship," Nick remembered his master saying when they thought the world would end, and in all the centuries they had known one another, Nick had only seen Lacroix denied his desire three times: himself, his sister, and Divia. He would not give Lacroix the first, and he could not give him the last. In giving this, however ...

The phone rang. Nick switched on the monitor with one hand and the desk lamp with the other. "Nicolas," Janette appeared on the screen, looking slightly cross. "I am ready to ... you were going to change your clothes before meeting me, were you not? And shave?"

"What's wrong with --" Nick objected instinctively, and then sighed. "Of course, Janette."

"Meet me in the foyer here in ten minutes," she directed. "I am giving you ten because I want you to drink another packet of that artificial junk-food you subsist on; you look too tired to keep up with me, and I need you at your best."

"As my lady commands," Nick replied, inclining his head with genial mockery.

Janette raised one perfectly-sculpted eyebrow and signed off. Replacing the handset, she took one last look at herself in the mirror. Her seamstress had outdone herself this time. It had been years since she'd owned anything quite so exquisite, not to mention decades since she'd had occasion to wear something like it. It was, in fact, quite like something she might have worn *before*: skin-tight black bodysuit with a sheer burgundy chiffon sheath dress; a sleeveless, simple and elegant gown with a deep round neckline that showed off her figure to its best advantage.

All she needed now was some fabulous piece of jewelry to accent the ensemble, not to mention Nicolas, who was late. No matter. They would simply have to fly.

Vachon walked slowly through the still-busy streets of Pompeii, ignoring the mortals who bumped and jostled him. Once he would have taken his fill here, but Divia's memories had quenched all those appetites. He had not taken an unwilling soul since that bloody night he crawled out of the only grave he had ever known. Rapt in his thoughts, Vachon wandered into Lacroix's palazzo.

"My dear, young Javier."

'Ha-vee-aye' -- Vachon had not heard his Spanish name spoken with a French accent since leaving Toronto; it struck his ears oddly. Vachon turned and looked up to meet Lucien Lacroix's crystal-blue eyes. Vachon had not remembered him being quite so looming.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" Lacroix glanced briefly about the room before discreetly motioning to Ferragimo, who hovered nearby. "If I recall, your preferences tend toward the fair ones."

"The fair ones? Like Urs. You remember her, don't you -- the one who died by the claws of your equally fair daughter. Or was it master?" Vachon's tone barely contained his contempt for this man and his spawn. He stared hard into Lacroix's eyes, but when they did not change, he continued. "I trusted you to protect her. She ... trusted you."

"Ah, dear Urs. She was, in many ways, like Divia before she was turned--"

"Urs was never like that hell-child you inflicted upon this world!"

Lacroix's unseeing gaze drifted over a group of revelers. "Divia was, admittedly, insane in her last days."

Vachon's voice became low and harsh: "You have not had her thoughts -- her memories -- running uncontrollably through your mind, hour upon hour...." Vachon pressed his hands to the sides of his head; it was painful for him to even speak of the visions inflicted by Divia. "She was mad long before being brought across. She inherited your lust for power, for control over others. No child should possess such thoughts or desires."

"You are all that is left of my daughter now, you realize. Because you survived, you are, in a sense, *her* child."

"Which makes me, what ... your half-brother? Now there's a bit of genealogy to be proud of." Vachon's tone became more snide as he realized Lacroix had no intention of harming him.

"It is why I summoned you here," Lacroix continued, pointedly ignoring Vachon's disrespectful comment. "You are the only one to have survived her attack and retain her memories within your mind."

"If it were up to me, not a single soul on this planet would remember her!"

"I can rid you of those memories, Javier." Lacroix nodded to the young girl Ferragimo had brought. She was very pretty; her blue eyes large in her face, with long blonde hair falling in curly tendrils, and her smile was still amazingly innocent. She promptly, and perhaps too eagerly, caressed Vachon's upper arm and then his shoulder, moving closer and pressing her warm, lithe body against his.

Vachon looked down into her face. In his mind, her dreamy features contorted in agony; her pouty, pink lips spread wide in a soundless scream; blood welled up in her eyes and spilled wantonly down her cheeks, etching them like acid over glass. Vachon pushed the girl away and closed his eyes against the images.

"You must take her. She has been prepared for you alone," Lacroix reassured the still-reluctant vampire. "It is the *only* way to free you and preserve Divia's memories."

Vachon finally opened his eyes and looked at Lacroix. He had to rid himself of these visions; he had come here to

do just that. Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded assent. Lacroix led Vachon and the girl to the stairs, giving them firm and non-negotiable instructions.

"If this is a trick, Lacroix, I will return with that stake I had intended to give you for your birthday." The threat had no real meaning for the older and far-more-powerful vampire, but made Vachon feel better just the same.

"This is the only gift I shall accept from you." Lacroix gave a sign to the posted guard before motioning the pair up the stairs to his private quarters.

Janette and Nick's appearance at the party had gone exactly as she had planned. The two of them had flown out of Rome and arrived in Pompeii in no time and the wind had been light. Still, her decision to wear her hair down had been a wise one. Nicolas had remembered to shave, and he had rather carelessly thrown a bracelet her way that had more than made up for his lateness. The diamonds and rubies matched her dress and glittered in the lights of the palazzo. There was no question but that all eyes had been upon them as they entered the building. Nicolas had even managed to choke down a retort when he overheard her mentioning that she had brought Lacroix Nick in lieu of a *thing* as her gift.

The party was in full swing by the time Alyce had negotiated the flight from Florence to Pompeii. She had flown as fast as she could ... well, she probably would have been a little earlier if she hadn't played tag with that airplane. Alyce giggled hysterically, remembering the look of terror and disbelief on her latest victim's face as his plane headed into a tailspin. She was still chuckling as she entered the palazzo, dressed to kill (literally) in an ankle length red silk evening gown, complete with belled skirt, heart shaped neckline, and the stake sewn into the lining. She certainly wouldn't forget the damned thing was there – it banged into her ankle every time she moved.

Alyce hesitated at the edge of the throng. Socializing would have to wait. After the exertion of the journey, she definitely needed a boost of energy. Alyce stopped one of the servers circulating unobtrusively through the guests. Choosing a glass of human blood from the tray -- noting absently that it was still slightly warm to the touch -- Alyce inquired, "The invitation mentioned something about animate refreshments."

"Those can be found in the antechamber, through the curtains at the end of the bar."

Alyce downed the contents of the glass and discarded it. Her heartbeat increased ever so slightly as she passed through the drapes into the smaller room. Bottled blood was tolerable, but nothing matched the intense rush of pleasure that came from feeding at the source.

Time had little meaning to her in the frenzy that followed. It might have been minutes, hours or days later when she emerged from the room, gorged and feeling more than a little bloated. She smiled with satisfaction. Now would be the perfect time to express her thanks to her host for his hospitality.

The girl lay weak and barely conscious, able to do nothing but placidly await whatever the General intended for her. Vachon had his suspicions as to what that might be – Lacroix was nothing if not a connoisseur.

Vachon went downstairs but found nothing, and no one, of interest to him in the now fairly crowded atrium. He wandered around, and eventually out into the expansive gardens. Vesuvius loomed large over the palazzo, casting deep pools of shadow which the torches lining the paths barely illuminated.

Nick stood alone near one of the torches. Janette had retired to the women's lounge to repair something in her appearance, imperceptible to him, which had fallen out of place. Nick had taken advantage of the opportunity to duck into the gardens and spend time by himself, to try to shake off the disconcerting feeling that this party was occurring somewhere outside of time -- that he could turn any corner and run into Urs or Erica or any of the others who would have been here if the fates had been kinder.

"Nick Knight. I should have expected you to be here," Vachon interrupted the other man's reverie.

"Vachon?" Nick's blue eyes widened in shock. "I never thought ... it never even occurred to me that you might be alive."

"Yes, well, Hell was a nice place to visit, but ... I didn't feel like staying." Vachon smiled at his attempted humor, but Nick did not. "So ... it's been a long time."

"Yes, it has. How are you? Do ... do you know about Tracy."

Vachon nodded and dropped his gaze to the slightly damp ground. He was quiet for a few moments, then finally looked up and met Nick's eyes. Vachon's voice was low and quiet. "You were there, Knight. You could have saved her."

"No." Nick shook his head. "I thought about it. But how could I condemn her to this eternal darkness?"

"I've got news for you, Knight" -- Vachon's voice gained a raw, contemptuous edge -- "that hole Tracy's laying in back in Toronto is a helluva lot darker than our nights will ever be. Been there. Done that." He pushed for a reaction, as a release to his own pent-up anger and frustration at not being there one last time for her.

Nick stared off into the distance for a moment before saying, almost to himself, "Natalie had faith that there is more than darkness beyond this existence. That there is light and redemption. I have to believe that she's right – that that's where she is now."

"Your doctor friend ... is dead?" Surprise extinguished Vachon's anger. "I'm sorry, Nick. She ... she was ... unique. I never thanked her for what she did, for trying to help Screed, for helping the rest of us at the risk of her own life. I hope she knew how much I...."

"She knew."

Suddenly, Vachon wanted nothing more than to go home. For years, home had just been a place to set his guitar while he took refuge from the sun ... and from the Inca. All that had changed in Toronto, but he thought he had left it all behind, all except the book Tracy had given him that single Christmas they had shared, with a faded pansy tucked between its pages, pressed by Urs years before. Now he realized he had a home, and he wanted to return there, to the warm evenings of Santo Domingo -- to Cenora.

Vachon took his leave of Nick, and launched himself into the air. Nick stared after him for a few moments, wondering if the younger vampire would find the peace he was looking for. Deep in thought, he strolled slowly back to the palazzo.

"What are you thinking?"

"Hello, Lacroix." Nick inclined his head in acknowledgment, a gesture that had served them for handshake, hug, and stake-through-the-heart in its time. No matter how many hours or years might pass between their

encounters, their relationship always seemed to pick up exactly where it had left off. His master hadn't changed outwardly, with only the cut of his austere black suit to distinguish the contemporary vampire from the infinite phantoms of him that haunted Nick's memories. "I was just contemplating your birthday gift."

"Indeed?" Lacroix prompted, raising one eyebrow in feigned disinterest.

"Indeed," Nick wryly confirmed. "I think Janette wanted to see you receive it, but I don't know where she's gotten to."

"Really? I don't recall ever having that problem with ... *my* ... fledglings."

Nick had to consciously restrain himself from growling; some things, apparently, never changed. "I was about to see whether there was something I could drink. If you can wait a moment, I'll be happy to show you your gift."

"No need," Lacroix said, gesturing to Ferragimo, who immediately strode across the room to fetch Nick's package from the display table. "I'll accompany you to the bar; I could use another glass myself." Lacroix remarked conversationally as they walked across the room, "It is convenient, celebrating at this end of the year, when the nights are longer. But so close to the equator there is minimal variation -- not like your current residence in Fairbanks."

"Most of the year, there, I can keep the same hours as everyone else."

"And you get summers off in your ... job ... don't you?"

At that moment, Alyce spotted Lacroix at the bar, having a drink with another man -- one who looked awfully familiar. If only he would turn around. Alyce studied the blond head, tracing the lean, muscular shape through his clothes. Definitely someone worth remembering. Maybe she could get him to ... hold her.

Lacroix emptied the last of his drink. "What do you think of the palazzo? You've seen the gardens, and this floor is a re-creation of my home in its final days."

"Nostalgic, Lacroix?" Nick asked.

"Perhaps ... ah," Lacroix set down his glass when Ferragimo returned with Nick's package and placed it on the bar. "Your gift, I believe, Nicholas?"

Nick did not answer, his attention distracted by a strangely familiar brown-haired woman who had just stepped out of a curtained alcove at the far end of the bar. He was unable to put a name to her face. As he watched, she wiped thick, fresh blood from the side of her mouth, licking it off her fingers with relish. The gesture evoked all the old ways Nick had tried to distance himself from, and he shuddered slightly.

Nick and Alyce's eyes met briefly, and recognition exploded through her. "Nick Knight!" she snarled, oblivious to the heads that turned in response to the low sound. She should have known he would be here. How absolutely perfect. She could wreak her revenge on both the vampire who refused to bring her over, leaving her for dead in a burning loft, AND on the one who had made her immortal and then abandoned her to the hells of fledgling hunger without a thought.

"Nicholas? This is your gift?"

Nick started. "Oh. Yes, that's the right one. Lacroix, that woman ..."

"Which woman?" Lacroix glanced in the direction of Nick's gaze. "Someone partaking of the ... animate refreshments?"

"What?"

"Animate refreshments, Nicholas. I do not stint my guests, as you know. I did not expect you would be interested, but if you would like ... a woman, perhaps? An artist?"

"What?" Nick repeated, grappling with the concept. His master's expression could freeze lava. No, he had gotten the metaphor backward. Hell, far from freezing over, was apparently burning merrily at exactly the same temperature as it had for eight centuries, if not twenty.

"Really, Nicholas, what did you think when you read the invitation? That I would serve nothing but bottled blood and those artificial blood products that salve your conscience so efficiently?"

"How dare you? How dare you commit this barbarism, and how dare you bring me into it? This is the twenty-first century, Lacroix, and --"

"Do not be absurd, Nicholas," Lacroix hissed. "Believe me, everything is in order with the mortal authorities, such as they are. And you came of your. Own. Free. Will." He arched one eyebrow, and began to unwrap the panel. "To bring me this, I believe."

Nick's hands curled into fists at his sides. Lacroix was no doubt telling the truth as far as it suited him; with the euthanasia situation what it was in so many countries these days, a segment of the population had appeared which would come willingly to vampires' fangs. There was nothing he could do. But that did not make it right. And he would not permit his presence to imply he believed otherwise.

Nick realized he had only himself to blame for the sour taste of disappointment welling up in the back of his throat. He had come to the party to find a Lacroix who could fit into the life he wanted to lead: a Lacroix who did not exist. Nick started toward the door. Janette would not be pleased, but she would accept it; encounters with Lacroix had ended this way too many times before.

"Nicholas!" Lacroix's hoarse whisper reached out and stopped him, made him turn around. Lacroix had unwrapped Nick's gift: a painting of a stately, blue-robed, blonde woman, no longer young. The style was flat and medieval, the paint faded and flaking, but the resemblance unmistakable. Lacroix raised his eyes from the picture, and for an instant, Nick saw in them what he had hoped to see when he had retrieved this portrait of Fleur. It was gone as quickly as it came, but it was enough. "Who?" Lacroix asked quietly. "When?"

"Andre, from memory." Nick paused and seemed to measure the silence between them. "Happy birthday, Lacroix," he said finally, and then turned and walked out of his master's home without a backward glance.

"Shit!" Alyce stared at Nick's disappearing backside. She took a step forward, then stopped when the stake slammed into her ankle. Now what? She could only kill one of them; the other would have to be tracked down later. But which one first? She tapped a fingernail against her front teeth. Decisions ... decisions. It was really unfair, but she *had* come here to kill her Master. It only took her a minute or so to retrieve her weapon, but by the time she looked up, Lacroix had gone. Frantically, she scanned the atrium, sighing with relief when she glimpsed him through the back

door. Clutching the stake in one hand, she ran through the room after him, ignoring the murmurs and whispers that followed in her wake.

Janette watched with open curiosity as Nicolas left the villa. Ah well, they had managed to enjoy each other's company for quite some time before Nicolas had discovered something to be disagreeable about, whatever it was. She wandered through the crowd in search of the one person who could provide her with an answer to her question. "Exactly what was it that so upset Nicolas?" she asked Lacroix when she found him in the gardens.

"I do not wish to discuss Nicholas' behavior right now." Lacroix opened the gate set into the wall at the back of the garden and led Janette down a path into the ruins of Pompeii.

"What do you wish to talk about?" Janette glanced at the ash-covered remains, then down at her shoes and dress. "Are we heading down there?" she said, waving in the general direction of the old city. "If we are, I will need to do something about my shoes."

Lacroix considered for a moment. "Perhaps it is time to see for myself what they have uncovered. I have been meaning to renew my acquaintance with Selene for some time now."

Alyce chuckled softly, as she watched the dark-haired female vampire stop and remove everything but her black body suit and jewelry. Some people have no sense of decorum, Alyce sniffed, then followed after the other two vampires.

"Selene?" Janette frowned. "She was your paramour, non?"

"Among other things." Lacroix looked around to get his bearings. It had been a long time. "If memory serves, her house would be just about ... here."

The roof of the building before them was buried under several feet of hardened ash, but the interior had been carefully cleared, so that the frescoes on the wall were visible. The portable items had been removed, but the wine bar still stood in one corner. Lacroix moved slowly around the main room, stopping to examine the murals. The colors were no longer as brilliant as they once were, but the figures still seemed to live and breathe.

"He looks like you." Janette pointed to a figure on one wall. Obviously meant to represent a god, he was fastening a mortal man to a torturing wheel as another god looked on.

"A minor joke that fell a little flat. Now this one is much better. A house slave posed for Dionysus, and Selene lay on a mat for hours pretending to be Ariadne. If she had only been able to weave as well as she fulfilled her other professional obligations, the likeness would have been perfect."

Sneezing as the dust caught in her nostrils, Janette complained, "One would think the scent of the ash would have died down after all these years. It will take hours to get the smell out of my hair."

They wandered around the house, admiring the frescoes, while Alyce waited impatiently outside. She perched on a stone wall, and rubbed her left ankle. Trying to stay hidden while scrambling down that path had not only cost her the heel of her best pair of shoes, but she had twisted her ankle as well. It was all that woman's fault. If she hadn't been there, Alyce would have already killed Lacroix, and her shoes would be just fine. Still, as long as she was stuck out here, she might as well investigate. She had always wanted to visit Pompeii, but she had never had enough influence to get herself on to one of the digs.

"Graffiti." Janette curled her upper lip. "Selene would have done well to have it removed from her walls. Tell me. Is ancient graffiti any more interesting than the modern kind?"

Lacroix read the scribblings over her shoulder. "Not really. That one is an advertisement for cheap lodgings. Very cheap if you ask me. As for this one, it is nothing more than a blatant falsehood. Demetus was the worst senator Pompeii ever had. The man could barely read, and his minions certainly could not spell. It was hardly surprising that he lost that election."

Janette wandered down the street a little further. "You still haven't told me what caused Nicolas to leave the party."

Lacroix ignored her question and turned to an embalmed figure. "A fitting fate. I tried for years to get the owners to muzzle that dog. It appears the gods were just as annoyed with its constant yapping."

Janette shook her head minutely and continued walking. Sometimes getting the desired information out of her former Master was a Herculean task. They wandered through the deserted city, chatting desultory about the people and places he had known during his mortal life.

A few feet behind them, Alyce hurled her remaining shoe away and dropped softly down from the wall. She followed cautiously, trying to keep one eye on the pair of vampires, and look at everything around her with the other. In a very short period of time, her dress was ripped in several places, and the feet of her pantyhose had completely disintegrated. Eventually, out of frustration, she tore the skirt of her dress off above her knees, and removed what was left of her hose, dislodging a stone from a half-fallen wall as she did so. Snarling in exasperation, she did her best to put it back where it belonged.

"There is someone else here." Janette whispered.

"Of course." Lacroix shrugged. "She has been with us from the beginning. Ignore her. She can do no harm to either of us." His attention was caught by a building to their left. "I should have known their house would survive. Self-righteous fools."

"Someone you know?"

"The Itemi. They believed their piety made them superior to everyone else in the city. Shall we go in? If the wall is still intact, I did get the last laugh." Her former Master's voice sounded almost cheerful. He directed her to a mural of a very young girl reading an apparently sacred book and shaking with the fervor of her piety. "They had no idea, you know. To the end, they believed that her recovery was a miracle."

"Whose recovery?" Janette was becoming impatient with him. Memories were all well and good, but this was not why she had come.

"Why, my most precious daughter Divia." Lacroix sneered. "Surely Nicholas has told you of her."

"Nicolas doesn't tell me anything of himself, much less others. Does this have something to do with why he was so willing to attend your gathering and then left so unexpectedly?"

"No." Lacroix gazed one more time at Divia and then turned to Janette. "Nicholas and I came to an understanding over my daughter. Our disagreement over how I chose to

feed my guests was far more predictable than his earlier compassion ever could have been."

Janette shook her head. It never ceased to amaze her how blind Nicolas could be at times. Exactly *what* he had thought animate food was if it was not alive and human was beyond her ability to imagine.

Alyce huddled outside. Enough was enough. It was definitely time to take matters into her own hands. If she left those two to continue their stroll down memory lane, she would be here all night. As she reached down to pick up the stake, the ground rumbled and shook, knocking her head first into the wall. What on earth? Stunned, she looked up to see what was going on ... directly into a previously hidden cache of scrolls. She pulled the closest one out, and unrolled it carefully to avoid damaging the ancient parchment.

The ground moved again. This time Alyce looked at Vesuvius. The sky above the volcano was filled with red clouds. As she watched, the cone of ash started to disintegrate; the volcano was about to erupt. Alyce began to remove the other scrolls from their hiding place. She couldn't let them be destroyed. She had only just found them.

"Mon dieu." Janette stumbled into Lacroix when the first tremor struck. "What the ... didn't you bother to make sure that mountain was safe before throwing this party?"

"The so-called experts said it was dormant." Lacroix threw his hands up in disgust and resignation. "I wonder what the chances are of this happening to someone twice in one lifetime. Shall we leave this godforsaken place?"

Without hesitation, both vampires hurtled upwards, smashing through the roof of the Villa Item. The world had changed while they were inside. The stars were now hidden beneath clouds of ash and smoke. The sky had turned red with the heat from the heart of Vesuvius, covering the mass exodus of vampires from Il Palazzo. Janette joined their flight, but Lacroix hung in the air above Pompeii. He found Alyce without difficulty. She was oblivious to the lava flowing down the mountain towards her. The thought crossed his mind that he could save her rather than Fleur's portrait, but it was quickly dismissed. Instead, he watched as the fiery, molten earth consumed his misbegotten child.

The ensuing news coverage of the event concentrated on the death toll and the destruction of the excavated old city. The fact that one living being had survived this same calamity twice went completely un-noticed.

Contributors

Alora Chistiakoff <alora@ap.net> came, saw, and now she can't stop writing about it.

Apache prefers to remain anonymous. She can be reached at **lf@cais.com**

Tippi Blevins <akaTippi@hotmail.com> got into fanfic long after she'd started writing and have been having fun ever since. Where else can you write about Evil Pink underwear or vampire clowns and not get put away for it? She's had two non-fanfic collections of poetry and fiction published in 1996, the latest about vampires. Sadly, not a clown among them.

Jane Credland <at506@freenet.toronto.on.ca> is a collector at heart. She feels most comfortable when surrounded by shelves of books, piles of compact discs and stacks of videotapes. Luckily, her partner feels the same way. Female action figures, their latest obsession, cavort across their desks, computers, bookshelves and window ledges. She started writing fan fiction to work through some problems she ran into with a draft novel. The fanfic keeps increasing, while the novel does nothing but collect cyber-dust.

Dianne T. DeSha a.k.a la Mercenaire <Cat.Goddess@pobox.com> "the Merc" is a born-and-bred California Girl now hanging out in Our Nation's Capital with her two cats, Lestat and Matisse--who consistently refuse to take responsibility for anything she says or does. Currently a Real Live Disgruntled Postal Worker, she wants to be a Real Author when she grows up (... *if* she ever grows up...).

Monica Fansler is a fan of many years' standing, being a member of the first generation of Star Trek fans, and has been in and out of fandom more times than she cares to count. In real life, she is a geochemist specializing in solving problems associated with the transport of nasties in soil and groundwater, and is a professor in the Environmental Science Department of a small private university in New Jersey (no comments!). Her current fascination with FK has more to do with a certain retired military officer than a certain police officer, but judging from what she's been reading on the fiction list lately, she's not alone.

Susan Garrett <susang@vitinc.com> is the Assistant Director of MIS for the Township of Dover (which means she fixes the laser printers when the police officers shoot them). She writes a lot of fiction very quickly and would rather be doing that than covering bullet holes in computers but, hey, it's a living. She collects Godzilla movies, reads historical fiction, and generally plays well with others. Her kitchen table is legendary.

Cynthia Hoffman <choff@violet.berkeley.edu> is a graduate student in English Literature at Berkeley who only sometimes remembers that what she really ought to be writing is her thesis. Early modern literary monsters make her happy, as do cats, toys, her partner, and sushi, not necessarily in that order.

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L'Phantom <jrarmstr@bsc.edu> "lurks in the catacombs" of Birmingham-Southern College, where he is majoring in Computer Science and minoring in Theatre. His interests include reading, writing, drawing, and aikido. He admits to being "a little unbalanced, but no more so than most," and lists among his aspirations, "to beat out Bill Gates, just so I can say I did."

Lisa McDavid <mcdavid-lisa@scarolina.edu> Lisa McDavid supports herself, six cats and her con habit as a librarian at the University of South Carolina. She is a listowner of Fkfic-l and Fkv4s-l, and used to be an owner of Forkni-l.

Calliope Monsoon <calliope31@mindspring.com> has orange and pink plaid skin, scales, corrective lenses and three large horns on her head. She's currently undergoing treatment for her insistance that she's a reincarnated warrior princess.

Mel Moser's <mmoser@tiac.net> first fandom is *Forever Knight* and the first time she's ever tried writing fan fiction. "Bedside Manners" is her first completed story. She also manages the Forever Knight Fan Fiction site (http://www.fkfanfic.com) and participates in the Forever Knight Virtual Fourth Season.

Carolyn Pryce <price@connecti.com> is a 30-something-plus instructor of computer applications at a major insurance company in San Antonio, Texas. CousinCP (her pen name) was "brought across" to FK fandom in mid-season 2 and finds the *Forever Knight* universe intriguing and compelling. She is a particular fan of the vampire patriarch, LaCroix, and his former daughter, Janette. New to the Internet, she is amazed at the wealth of creativity and involvement of not only the fans of FK, but numerous other television shows as well.

Amy Rambow <akr@email.unc.edu> is a Knightie and a Fleur-Booster as well as a graduate student at University of North Carolina

Jamie Melody Randell <immajer@mindspring.com> There's a bio????? Sharon did not tell me this. Now I'm scared.

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Cousin Jules (aka KnightGal aka Julie Stafford) <KnightGal@aol.com> lives in Houston, Texas, and has worked as a Paralegal here for the past 10 years. She shares her home with her 'children'<g> - Watson, a Jack Russell Terrier (think 'Wishbone'!), and Devo, a Whippet (think 'small Greyhound'<g>). She's a big fan of Sherlock Holmes and most kinds of music, drive a black Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo, and does volunteer work at a local AIDS hospice (Omega House). She enjoys reading/writing fan fic and studying French when time permits, watching Notre Dame football, puttering about the house, and shopping (clothes, cosmetics and lingerie, *not* groceries!<g>).

Kathy Whelton <103045.2473@compuserve.com> lives in Londonderry, N.H.. She works as a Labor and Delivery nurse at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. She is married to a very understanding husband and is the mother of two young boys.